

# interzone



JUNE-JULY 2002

NUMBER 180

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## *'The Blue Portal'* Eric Brown

Keith Brooke  
Terry Bisson  
Chris Beckett  
Timons Esaias

## *China Miéville interview*



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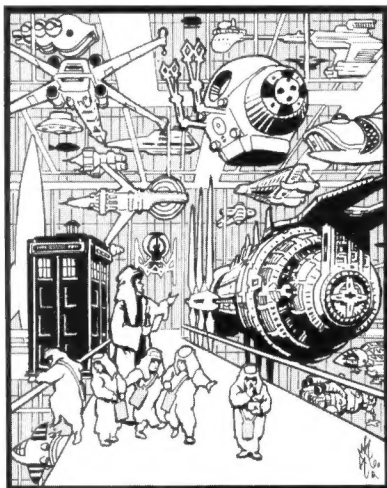
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## COMING NEXT MONTH

Part Two of Eric Brown's novella, "The Blue Portal." Also, good new stories by other *Interzone* favourites as well as less familiar writers, plus our usual spread of non-fiction and reviews. So be sure to keep a look out for the August issue.



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# interzone

science fiction & fantasy

JUNE - JULY 2002

Number 180

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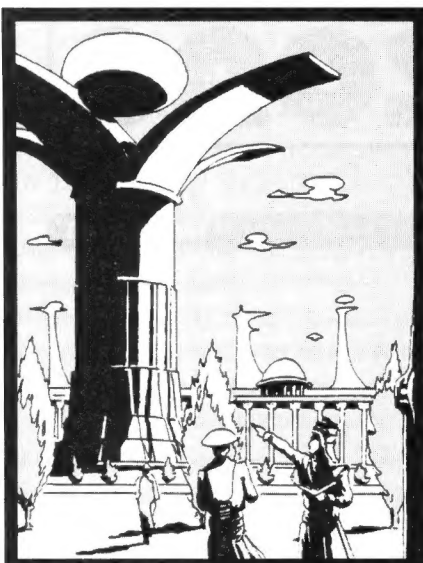
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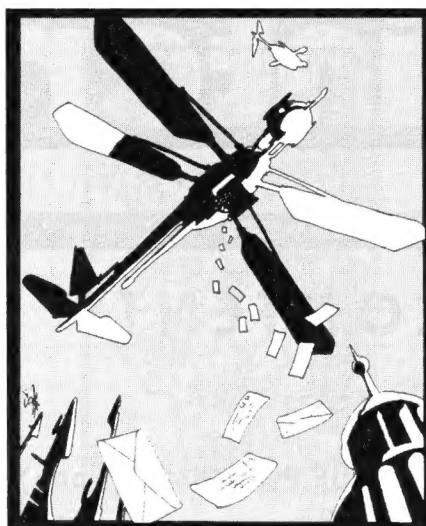
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## INTERFACE

### Important Announcement

Readers will have noticed that this issue of *Interzone* is dated "June-July 2002." This does not mean that the magazine has moved to a bimonthly schedule, and nor does it mean that we have skipped an issue. The issue numbering remains continuous, and the magazine remains monthly, so no one loses out. (All subscriptions are per six or twelve issues and take no account of cover dates.) It's just that we've found it necessary, because of gradual slippage in our schedule, to re-date the magazine so that it covers two months for this issue only. We apologize for this, and hope that it causes no undue confusion. The next issue, number 181, will be the August 2002 issue.



Dear Editors:

When Norman Spinrad published *The Iron Dream*, Hitler's greatest sf novel, he was critiquing power-worshipping attitudes in a lot of "classic" sf. When David Langford repeated an anagram made out of Osama bin Laden's name ("Ansible Link," *Interzone* 176) he was closer to questioning the relevance of linking Al-Qaeda to Asimov. Which makes Darrell Schweitzer's letter (*IZ* 177) all the more perplexing.

I haven't seen China Miéville's comments on the subject. However, even if he puts forward an argument like that to be found at [www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/5491-4.cfm](http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/5491-4.cfm), which asserts that Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* was translated into Arabic as Al-Qaeda and that bin Laden may have thought he was inspired by Hari Seldon, this hardly amounts to an attack on Asimov (though I think the website author's irony is somewhat heavy-handed). Charles Manson thought the Beatles' "Helter Skelter" called him to mass murder. Are the Beatles responsible for that? Interestingly enough the title of Karl Marx's preparatory musings on capital, *Grundrisse*, can also be translated as base or foundation. Perhaps Asimov and bin Laden were both inspired by him and the names signify a secret Marxist current in future histories and Islamic fundamentalist terrorism.

This is the second time I've written out of irritation rather than to praise your fiction, which is unfair as the last year has been particularly good. Zoran Zivkovic's musical stories were even stronger than his previous collection. Other outstanding pieces include Ruairidh Pringle's "Meeting the Relatives," Tony Ballantyne's "Indecisive Weapons," Dominic Green's "Queen of Hearts," Thomas M. Disch's "After Postville" and Liz Williams's "The Sharecropper." It's been a good year for humour too, which can be the most leaden story-type when it fails.

## INTERACTION + INTE

Finally, please don't listen to the likes of Lee Tchami (*IZ* 177), saying that you should publish only overtly fantastical fiction. Long ago, in the editorial for issue one, David Pringle wrote that *Interzone* aimed to be "devoted to intelligent science fiction and fantasy – and to the other types of imaginative prose which lie on the borders of those genres." That's a good aim. Please keep hold of the borders.

**Ken Olende**

London N16

Dear Editors:

Thanks for *IZ* 178. I am pleased that you are continuing to publish Richard Calder unashamedly ("Zarzuela"). I finished his novel *Frenzetta* and had no idea why I had enjoyed it so much. Perversely I find his increasing accessibility slightly reduces my appreciation, but then that is the nature of the beast.

The latest story featured Calder's obligatory unnatural lovers. His appeal is probably best summarized by a quote from *The Twist* where Nicola describes Viva and Twist as the "ones who, if not able to cauterize that cruel, foul, suppurating wound, would pack it with the right obsessional gel until a proper transplant could be arranged."

But – a story by Richard Calder and no cover by Dominic Harman... Unforgivable!

**Steve Tollyfield**

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Dear Editors:

My belated list of the best of *Interzone* fiction in 2001 seems to amount to more than half the fictional output of the year. The following standout stories of the year is in approximate descending order. The diptychs have done exceedingly well, with great stories Ballantyne and Beckett. I particularly like the development of the new Beckett stories from the roots of the "Welfare Man" tales.

Leigh Kennedy, "Wind Angels" (#171)

James Lovegrove, "Junk Male" (#171)

Mat Coward, "The Second Question" (#169)

Eric Brown, "Children of Winter" (#163)

Tony Ballantyne,

"Restoring the Balance" (#167) and

"Restoring the Balance, 2" (#168)

Chris Beckett, "Marcher" (#172) and

"Watching the Sea" (#173)

Ayerdahl, "Flickering" (#167)

Barrington J. Bayley, "Domie" (#172)

David D. Levine, "Nucleon" (#174)

Tony Ballantyne,

"A New Beginning" (#163)

Roy Gray, "Wormholes" (#166)

Christopher Evans, "Da Capo" (#174)

Stephen Dedman, "Ravens" (#164)

Lisa Tuttle, "A Cold Dish" (#172)

Neal Asher, "The Sea of Death" (#169)

Cherith Baldry,

"Under the Saffron Tree" (#166)

Tony Ballantyne,

"Indecisive Weapons" (#172)

On the downside, I only have two specific stories to mention, namely Paul Di Filippo's "Return to Cockaigne" (#163), which pretty much missed me on every level, and Thomas M. Disch's "Martian Madness" (#170), which really didn't seem to be worth even an apparently slight effort.

The many Richard Calder stories were a bit of a mixed blessing. I never finished the very first one in the series and would have howled down the idea of continuing the "Espirito Santo" tales at such length but they developed well. However, the plot seemed to thin out towards the end as the last tale drizzled away. I found Zoran Zivkovic's writing immediately interesting and mostly entertaining, but towards the latter part of the year I felt that the underlying similarity of his tales became a little wearing too

close together.

The book reviews in 2001 don't seem to have had as much space as I feel they deserve, mostly at the expense of increased reviewing of non-books. I can't imagine buying audio fiction, though I do find those reviews pretty well written. "Mutant Popcorn" is always a delight but the TV reviewing just doesn't seem to be working. Whilst reviews and reviewers are always going to have an opinion, I have also relied on *Interzone's* reviewers being pretty authoritative. Paul McAuley, John Clute and Nick Lowe have always given the air of knowing about their subject and of being interested in learning more. Chris Gilmore may occasionally seem overly pedantic on editorial minutiae but he doesn't lose track of the purpose of the books he reviews. Then we have Evelyn Lewes, who actively professes to be an average viewer. I have two of those at home and don't really need another. Her writing seems to have resulted in more letter-column-inches than Charles Platt and Gary Westfahl put together, not even including her own rebuttals. If that is the point, fair enough, but if the idea of a TV reviewer is actually to inform the rest of us, I don't feel better informed of anything but the nature of Evelyn Lewes's television habits. Tim Robins's "Report from Farpont" doesn't yet seem to have settled to the extent that I can work out what to think about it at all. (Looking into 2002, the *Star Trek* item was deeply interesting, but looks to have slipped out of a Cultural Studies journal.)

Nevertheless, I always look forward to the next issue.

**Duncan Lawie**

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SMS, the provider of the delightful icons that decorate this magazine, and his wife Eira are expecting their first-born on 22nd July. To celebrate, SMS has provided the above illustration, taking Eira as his model.

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# The Blue Portal

Eric Brown

## Part One

On a bitterly cold morning in February 1935, I met the writer Edward Vaughan outside Waterloo station.

He was a tall, broad man, whose choice of dress ran to rough and ready tweeds, and he was never without a lighted pipe. His hair was grey, and swept back in leonine profusion, his face craggy and weathered, fissured like some outcropping open to the depredation of the elements. It was an apt metaphor: although quiet and private, he had once let slip, after a succession of double malts had loosened his tongue, that he had known tragedy in his life. He had lost a brother in the Great War, and five years ago his wife had succumbed to cancer.

He was introspective, but amiable: on our first meeting he had praised a short story of mine published by our mutual friend Jasper Carnegie in *The Monthly Scribe*. In company he was thoughtful and somewhat reserved – though his reserve suggested, not the suspicion that some taciturn men emanate, but a wealth of quiet understanding of the ways of the world.

He was standing beside his Austin 16 when I hurried along the pavement with my overnight bag, somewhat out of breath.

“Mr Vaughan!” I panted. “Forgive me. Late as ever! The buses –”

He smiled around the stem of his pipe. “What’s five minutes, Jonathon? And please, call me Edward.”

He took my bag and stowed it in the back of the car, and I climbed into the passenger seat beside him. He pulled into the street and proceeded to drive through the city with a quiet attention and thoroughness I came to view as characteristic.

“What are you working on at the moment?” he asked, glancing my way.

I said that I was stalled on the latest novel and he smiled, nodding. “I know the feeling well,” he sympathized.

He puffed his pipe, and soon a pungent fug filled the car. He opened the quarter-light, murmuring apologies, and I breathed freely again.

Vaughan published his first novel in 1925, at the age of 40. It was much publicized at the time as being in the tradition of H. G. Wells – a Scientific Romance, to use that old term, set thousands of years into the future of planet Earth. It was an odd choice of subject matter for a beginning novelist to pursue, and a practitioner with less literary skill and intelligence might have failed miserably. The book was an instant success, however, earning the plaudits of the crusty literary establishment with its undoubted stylistic merit and the breadth of its imaginative daring.

I ventured to ask what he was writing now, and he told me that he had just finished, and submitted to his editor, his latest novel.

We chatted thus as we left London in our wake and motored along the rolling roads of Berkshire.

A new fall of snow had settled during the night, and a bright winter sun had appeared to light the scene: the land on either side of the metalled road wore a dazzling mantle of unsullied snow; we passed occasional oak trees, standing in splendid isolation, all the more magnificent for the burden of snow carried by each and every branch.

Inevitably, perhaps, the conversation found its way on to the subject of Jasper Carnegie.

“Have you been to the Grange before?” Vaughan asked.

“Never. This will be the first time. I usually meet Carnegie at his office in London.”

“You’ve known him long?”



"He was in the year above me at Cambridge," I said. "So, what, about 15 years?" I smiled. "He was old before his time. He was editing a magazine, even then. Inevitable that that's what he'd do out here in the real world."

"He was a friend at Cambridge?"

"I'd hesitate to call him a friend. More of an acquaintance. I've actually come to know him better over the past two or three years, since he started the *Scribe*."

Vaughan glanced at me as he drove. "In your opinion," he asked, "is Carnegie of sound mind?"

The question surprised me. "Well... I've never had reason to question his sanity, if that's what you mean."

He chewed on the stem of his pipe. "What did you make of his phone call?"

"It was somewhat surprising, to say the least. And not only at the late hour he called."

"What did he tell you?"

"Not a lot, and to be honest I'd had a little too much to drink at the time. He invited me down to the Grange, said something about wanting you and me to help him investigate something."

"But he didn't say what?"

I shook my head. "No, nothing at all. Just a second – he did mention something about some strange goings on."

"He said much the same to me. When I tried to question him, he clammed up. Very strange, if you ask me. And all the more so because he hardly knows me. I've met him, what, on three or four occasions, when he's bought pieces from me for the *Scribe*. I was the last person I thought he'd summon when he was in need of help."

I glanced across at him. "You thought that that's what he wanted?"

Vaughan frowned. "He sounded agitated, disturbed. More than once he mentioned an investigation, and odd happenings which he thought might interest me. But as I say, I hardly know the chap."

"He always was a bit of a loner," I offered. "He never made friends easily. Apparently he's become a bit of a recluse at the Grange, only venturing out to oversee the office in London."

"Curiouser and curiouser," Vaughan murmured to himself. "We shall see what we shall see."

In due course, as a swollen, ruddy sun was extinguishing itself over the low folds of the horizon, we drove through a snow-bound Aylesbury and followed a signpost to the village of Fairweather Cranley, ten miles to the south.

Forty minutes later Cranley Grange, to give Carnegie's ancestral home its full title, appeared as we crested a rise in the lane; it stood between beech woods in the lee of the Chiltern hills, an imposing, foursquare pile with the folly-like addition of gothic towers or belvederes at each corner. Its dour façade appeared all the more eldritch in between a roof upholstered in snow and the dazzling white mantle which covered the entirety of the surrounding land.

I was impressed by its size and the extent, judging from the length of the drive-way, of its grounds. Vaughan halted the car on the crest of the lane, the better to view the Grange as the setting sun, behind us, blazed in the

building's serried windows.

"He lives there alone?" I enquired.

"Apparently. He has a brother, but I rather think he's in India."

"Charles, he's a doctor in Bombay," I said. "He was in the same year as me at Cambridge. A greater contrast to Jasper you couldn't meet. Chalk and cheese."

Vaughan ground the gears and we skidded down the gentle incline of the hill and turned into the drive-way. The snow had not been cleared, and progress was slow. Eventually we arrived before the rise of steps that gave access the double doors. I climbed out, retrieved my bag, and accompanied Vaughan towards the house.

Carnegie's valet showed us into the library, where Vaughan planted himself with his back to the log fire, and I inspected the books ranged along the west wall. Most of them appeared to be volumes of traveller's tales dating from the last century, along with a good number of atlases and bound maps.

"Gentlemen! Vaughan, Langham... you don't know how delighted I am that you could make it."

I turned. Jasper Carnegie stood framed in the doorway, a short, rubicund figure in moleskin breeches and a faded scarlet waist-coat. He was balding, with a well-fed face, and he appeared far older than his 36 years; indeed, it was hard to believe that he and I were almost the same age.

"Do let me get you a drink. Whisky, brandy? Something to take the chill from your bones!"

We both chose brandy, and Carnegie rubbed his hands and beamed, delighted. "Brandy it is, and I think I'll join you."

He poured three stiff measures from a bottle on a well-stocked table in the corner. As Carnegie passed the drinks and joined us before the hearth, I was struck by the resemblance between the editor's physique and the glass he nursed in the palm of his hand.

I also noticed, as he raised the glass to his lips, that his hand trembled, ever so slightly.

Carnegie enquired as to how our respective writing projects were faring, and for a while we traded business talk. He informed us that the latest issue of the *Scribe* was at the printers, and launched into a diatribe aimed at that beleaguered profession.

I wanted nothing more than to ask him why he had summoned us here, but thought it diplomatic not to interrupt.

He recharged our glasses and I admired his library.

This provided a further ten minutes of conversation. I was about to ask what, exactly, Carnegie had meant by the "strange goings on" that he wished us to investigate, when he said, "I'll show you to your rooms, and after you've changed we'll have a spot of dinner. How's that sound?"

We finished our drinks and followed Carnegie to our rooms. I washed and changed, then joined the others in the library, where we were to dine.

The dinner, I was somewhat surprised to find, was superb: a haunch of venison, roast vegetables, and numerous bottles of the finest wine I had sampled in ages. We ate and drank for over two hours in the flickering light of the fire, and after the initial uneasiness of



our arrival, we fell into conversation as if we were old friends reunited.

Carnegie and I recounted our Cambridge days, while Vaughan spoke of his time at Oxford. I asked after Carnegie's brother, Charles; as I thought, he was in India, working as doctor.

"But," said Carnegie, waving his glass – by this time we were all somewhat the worse for the grape – "You'll be delighted to learn that he'll be back next week. You'll have to come down. What a reunion that will be!"

Vaughan regarded his glass. "If you don't mind my asking, Carnegie, you mentioned on the phone—"

"There's plenty of time for that tomorrow, my dear Vaughan."

"You can't even give us some hint?" I ventured.

He lowered his glass and leaned forward slightly, both palms flattened on the table to either side of his empty desert bowl. "Gentlemen," he said, regarding us in turn, "I rather think that, if I were to recount the reason for your presence here, you would in your current state of inebriation take me for a madman, and in the morning believe not a word of what you'd heard."

"You are nothing if not intriguing," Vaughan said, smiling.

Carnegie changed the subject. He stared at me with pop-eyes. "What do you think of the world, Langham?"

"The world?" I asked, surprised. "Well, that's rather a big question after so much excellent claret."

"I'll be more precise. I mean, the modern world, society. Commerce, popular culture..." He waved, as if to encompass all the other aspects of the world he had omitted to mention.

"Well," I began. "I think the great evil is the fact that popular culture is driven by commerce. People in power, with vested interests, are force-feeding a populace what they think it wants..."

Carnegie was nodding. "That's why I like your novels, Langham. They seem not of this time. Your characters are paradigms for the universal aspects of the human psyche. Perhaps I'm not making myself clear..."

He refilled his glass, tipsily. I glanced across at Vaughan, who was smiling quietly to himself.

"And you, Vaughan," Carnegie went on, "your visions... D'you know something, Vaughan? To be perfectly honest I'm sick and tired of the world I find myself inhabiting – I might even say, find myself imprisoned in. That's why I find your visions so liberating. They speak to me of something beyond the mundane and every-day, the petty concerns of humankind."

"That's what I'm trying to get at," Vaughan said. "I want to show the reader that there are more things in heaven..."

Carnegie reached across the table and gripped the cuff of Vaughan's tweed jacket. "Do you really think so, my friend? Do you think that out there, or somewhere maybe in the future, there exist races and civilizations of which we with our puny intelligence can but dream?"

His eyes burned, and something about the intensity of his sentiment sent a shiver down my spine.

Vaughan smiled and filled his pipe. "Carnegie, I don't

just think there is more to the universe than we have ever imagined, I'm certain of it."

Carnegie nodded. "Good. Excellent." He raised his glass. "To the mysterious universe," he declared, "and all who live in it!"

We raised our glasses. "...to all who live in it," we echoed.

"And tomorrow," Carnegie went on, "I want to show you... *something*. Be prepared for a hike, my friends,"

This was the last coherent sentence we heard from him, as shortly thereafter he slipped into unconsciousness. We eased him onto the chesterfield before the fire and retired to our respective rooms.

The following morning we breakfasted in the library, Carnegie seemingly none the worse for his excess of the night before.

As Vaughan and I helped ourselves to kippers, Carnegie excused himself and told us that he would be back presently with something that we might find of interest.

When he had departed, I asked, "What did you make of all that talk of other worlds and times last night?"

Vaughan smiled. "I could say that he's been reading too much Wells and Vaughan," he said. "But, coming as it does on top of whatever he's brought us here to look into..." He gestured with a corner of toast. "We'll no doubt find out in due course."

Two minutes later Carnegie returned with what looked like a portfolio tucked beneath his right arm. He cleared a space on the table and laid it before us.

"I would like you to take a look at some photographs, gentlemen, and see what you make of them."

Intrigued, we leaned forward as he opened the cover of the portfolio like some vast trapdoor to a magical underground kingdom.

He shuffled through a pile of perhaps a dozen large, glossy photographs, then handed us one each. I stared at mine, attempting to make sense of the image. I passed it to Vaughan, raising my eyebrows in mystification. Vaughan gave me the photograph that he had been studying, evidently with the same perplexity as I felt myself.

The first picture showed what appeared to be a flash of light, surrounded by darkness; the second displayed much the same, though in this one the flash was not so bright, and shapes in the surrounding darkness could be discerned, though quite what those shapes might be, I could not rightly say.

We considered each of the dozen pictures; they were very much alike, all showing the ubiquitous light upon a dark field, with the light varying in intensity from one photograph to the next.

"Well," Carnegie said, glancing from Vaughan to myself. "What do you think?"

I exchanged a quick look with the novelist. "H'm," I began. "Interesting, but what are they?"

Carnegie beamed. "That, my friends, is what I too would like to know."

Vaughan leaned over the photographs now spread upon the table-top. He pointed to one or two. "In the darkness here, and here, I can make out shapes – they almost look like branches. Trees."



Carnegie was nodding. "They were taken at night in Hopton Wood," he offered.

"And the light?" I asked.

"Look more closely at the light, especially in these two photographs." He pushed two images across the table towards us, and Vaughan and I bent to inspect them.

"Can you make out shapes, outlines? There, and there..."

Now that he mentioned it, I could discern the very vaguest of patterns upon the print. In the bright explosion of light upon each photograph was the faintest shadow.

"Do the shapes suggest anything to you, gentlemen?"

I frowned, and glanced at Vaughan; his perplexed expression must have mirrored my own. He shook his head. "I suppose, if one stretched one's imagination... one might almost convince oneself that they might be faces. But, then again, they might be many things."

If I squinted, and employed sufficient imagination, I could almost persuade myself that the shadowy shapes within the light did resemble, ever so slightly, ghostly visages.

"Faces," Carnegie declared. "Exactly. That's exactly what I thought!"

"I take it you took these photographs yourself?" Vaughan asked.

Carnegie nodded, and I burst in, "But in that case you must know what you were taking pictures of, surely!"

Carnegie tucked his thumbs into the pockets of his waist-coat and leaned back in his seat. "Gentlemen, I set up the equipment to take these photographs, but I was not in Hopton Wood at the time they were actually taken." He gathered the pictures together and closed the portfolio.

"If you would care to explain..." Vaughan began.

"That walk I mentioned last night – after lunch we'll take a stroll over to Hopton Wood. There is something there that I think you might find of interest."

We set out after lunch at one o'clock, and I had to admit that I was more than a little intrigued. I considered Carnegie's claim, that the shapes in the photographs were faces, as far-fetched to say the least. But the fact was that something in the wood had prompted him to haul a good amount of heavy photographic equipment all the way from the Grange, and I could not hazard a guess as to what that might be. There was always the possibility, of course, that Jasper Carnegie was mad.

There can be few more beautiful landscapes than the English countryside when adorned with a fresh fall of snow. A bright winter sun was shining and the effect upon the brilliant white mantle was almost blinding. When my eyes adjusted to the glare, I made out, stretching out before me, hills and vales softened by snowfall: for as far as the eye could see not a blemish marred the pristine perfection. The only contrast was provided by the vertical trunks of distant trees, dark strokes against the untouched canvas of the snow-covered land. It was almost a shame to mark the fall with our footsteps.

Carnegie led the way, and I had to admit that he cut a somewhat comical figure in his ankle-length waxed coat and deerstalker. Vaughan and I followed, he striding out

with his hands in the pockets of his tweed jacket and his pipe thrust resolutely before him.

Carnegie had packed a haversack with a thermos of coffee and, for good measure, a bottle of brandy. I felt like a schoolboy again, embarking upon some adventurous holiday outing.

Cranley Grange stood amid the rolling slopes of the Chilterns, with extensive beechwoods covering the crests of the surrounding hills. We climbed for a time towards the distant trees, our steps ringing from the compacted snow a series of high, musical notes. There was not a breath of wind in the air and the sunlight upon our heads was unseasonably warm.

After perhaps 30 minutes we paused to take in the view. I turned and stared down the incline at the Grange, reduced by perspective to the size of an architect's scale model. I was impressed, I recall, by the absolute stillness of the scene, the air of calm and solitude. The cares and concerns of London seemed a million miles away.

We resumed our trek, Carnegie pointing the way with his shooting stick and panting as he climbed the hill.

"Ancient woodland," he panted, gesturing up ahead with his stick. "It's seen the history of England played out before them; if only trees could talk!"

We came to the tree-line on the side of the hill, and Carnegie paused. "Hopton Wood," he said. "Not far now, perhaps a mile, and the going will be easier under cover of the trees."

We entered the wood, going single file down a narrow track between short ferns and tall beech trees. For the most part the snow had not penetrated the tree cover, and the effect was as if we had stepped from one world to the next, or from one season to another: we had left winter behind us, and were approaching spring.

The air was musty, something almost tobacco-like in the aroma of humus and dead wood. Sunlight slanted through the denuded branches, falling in columns and illuminating dust motes like swirls of smoke. The effect was almost fairy-tale. Thirty minutes later we came to a clearing in the trees, a circular area perhaps 30 feet across. I knew, then, that there was something... *peculiar* about the place, but at the time I could not quite define what made me think this. Only later, in conversation with Vaughan back at the Grange, did it come to me: despite the lack of tree cover, not a flake of snow had fallen upon the clearing.

"This is it, gentlemen," Carnegie declared. "This is where it happened."

We were silent for a time, and then Vaughan asked, "Where *what* happened, Carnegie?"

He did not immediately reply. As if in a daze, he wandered off into the middle of the clearing and gazed about him, first looking up into the sky, and then around at the enclosing trees. At last he regarded the ground at his feet, and nodded to himself. He prodded his stick against the soil, as if having satisfied himself upon some point.

I glanced at Vaughan and shrugged.

Carnegie looked up, staring at us.

"Step forward," he commanded.

We did so, and he said, "Do you feel it?"

I said, "Feel what, Carnegie?"

"The change, the subtle shift."

I concentrated. Undoubtedly it was warmer in the clearing, but this was accounted for by the fact that we were now standing directly beneath the midday sun.

"There's a charge in the air," Carnegie was saying. "Something almost... I don't know... electric. Look at the hairs on the back of your hands."

Feeling ludicrous, I did so. I noticed that Vaughan was also inspecting his hand.

I started as I realized, improbably, that Carnegie was right: the hairs on the back of my hand and wrist were standing to attention. As I stared, I convinced myself that I felt a *frisson*, almost a shiver, pass across my flesh.

I stepped back into the shade of the trees and again inspected my hand. No longer were the hairs standing upright. Vaughan conducted the same experiment and frowned at me. "Very strange," he murmured.

I stepped back into the clearing, and this time I told myself that I did feel something, a charge in the air, a certain heat that could not be accounted for by the presence of the sunlight alone.

"Would you mind telling us what's going on?" I asked.

Carnegie paced to the far side of the clearing and stood with his back to us for a time, apparently deep in thought. At last he turned and said, "It's a strange tale, gentlemen, and to be honest I don't rightly know what to make of it myself. I can but describe the events as they occurred, and see what you think." He paused. "I'll begin at the beginning, or the beginning as far as I can tell."

I accommodated myself against the broad bole of a tree, and Vaughan joined me. Together we sat while Carnegie paced back and forth like an actor upon a stage, which in effect was what he was.

"I first noticed the phenomenon 24 days ago, though I dare say it had been occurring long before that. I'm in the habit of walking at night – there are times when sleep does not come easily, and I find that a turn around the countryside for an hour or two tires me sufficiently so that I can get a night's rest. On this particular occasion I had retired around ten, but could not sleep. I rose, dressed, and set off towards Hopton Wood. It was a clear night, and the moon was almost full. There was no snow, and thus the going was relatively easy. I was perhaps half a mile from the wood when I noticed the light."

"The light?" Vaughan echoed.

"It was a brilliant blue radiance that seemed to emanate from the very heart of the wood. It appeared as a great fan-like aurora above the tree-tops, pulsing in a slow, regular rhythm. As I approached, I could see that the light was at its most intense at ground level, as it shone brilliantly through the trees, silhouetting their trunks."

"Had you any idea at the time what it might have been?" I enquired. "Weren't you apprehensive?"

He shook his head. "No, to both questions. I had not the slightest idea as to what might be causing the light, but I did not feel the least concern. Rather, I was excited by the possibilities..."

As I listened to him, I realized that I was more than a little intrigued by the fact of Carnegie's strange

encounter.

"I hurried through the trees, following the glowing light. By the time I arrived at the clearing, I was exhausted, and realized that I had run the last few hundred yards."

"What did you see?" Vaughan asked.

Carnegie smiled and shook his head. "At the very second I approached the clearing, the light ceased, vanished as if it had never existed. The clearing was in darkness, but for the light of the moon. I searched for any sign of the device that might have been responsible, but of course found nothing. However, I did become aware of the atmosphere in the clearing. The air was charged, more so than it is now, and there was a certain aroma in the air – almost a burning scent. Have you ever turned on an electric fire which has stood unused for a time? The reek of singed dust which arises then was something similar to the scent that pervaded the air that night."

Vaughan was leaning forward, hands clasped, his pipe long since extinguished. "Mysterious indeed," he murmured. "Did you investigate the clearing by the light of day?"

Carnegie smiled. "I returned home – though I could hardly sleep for excitement. At first light that morning I set off again..." He paused, staring around the clearing as if recollecting what he had discovered.

"And?" Vaughan prompted. "What did you find?"

"At first, upon arriving here, I noticed nothing untoward. There was still a certain charge to the air, and the singed aroma persisted, but that was all. Or so I thought. Closer inspection revealed a number of dead animals: an owl, a few moles and voles – and a fox. They seemed in good condition: that is, not subject to the attack of other beasts. They lay upon the ground as if in sleep. I know that the discovery of dead animals in a wood is to be expected from time to time, but the fact that I had happened upon so many in the same area, where the night before a singular light had manifested itself, struck me as significant."

"Did you by any chance recover the remains of these animals?" Vaughan asked.

"Of course – I returned with a sack and transported them up to a veterinary surgeon in Aylesbury. I explained that I had found them on my land, but of course refrained from recounting the exact circumstances surrounding their discovery, and requested that he attempt to find out what had caused their deaths."

"And he did?" I asked.

Carnegie frowned. He was standing before us with his hands in the pockets of his ankle-length coat, his deer-stalker pushed back on his head to reveal his sweat-soaked forehead. "He reported that he was mystified. The animals seemed to be in perfect health – at least, they were free from any disease which might have caused their deaths. I could see that he was intrigued: he questioned me about where and when I had discovered them, but I merely repeated my story about having found them on my land."

"Stranger and stranger," Vaughan said, abstracted. He was slowly filling his pipe with Old Holborn, tamping the tobacco down with his thumb.



"Like something from one of your books," Carnegie smiled. "Now do you understand why I had to bring you here?"

I recalled the photographs he had shown us back at the Grange. "When did you set up the photographic equipment?" I asked.

"It didn't immediately occur to me that I might make a photographic record of the phenomenon," he said. "Every night for the next week I returned to the clearing and lay in wait. I was about to give up my nightly vigil – thinking that the light had been a unique event, never to be repeated – when it occurred for a second time, or at least for a second time to my knowledge. It was midnight, around the same time I had noticed the light on the first occasion. I was on the very margin of the clearing, in a sleeping bag I had brought along against the cold, when I heard a high whining sound in the air. I climbed to my feet, and at that second experienced an almighty explosion which knocked me to the ground and rendered me unconscious."

"You were injured?" I exclaimed.

He shook his head. "When I awoke, it was daylight. Hours had elapsed. I examined myself, but seemed to be in one piece, though I did feel nauseous and dizzy. I examined the clearing, discovering one or two dead animals, mice and a vole or two."

Vaughan removed his pipe and used it to point at Carnegie. "The blast must have killed them," he said. "And I venture that if you'd been any closer, it would have accounted for you, too."

Carnegie nodded grimly. "I dare say you're right. The same thought occurred to me at the time."

I said, "So you decided to keep away from the clearing at midnight, and install the cameras instead?"

"I kept my distance from then on. I returned nightly, but nothing further occurred. Then it struck me that, perhaps, for some reason the light might keep to a regular rhythm. That is, that it might appear a third time eight days after its second appearance, which was eight days after I first noticed it. Rather than risk life and limb again, I had the idea of setting up the cameras. I rigged up a device to take a photograph every few minutes, then retreated to the perimeter of the wood and set up camp. Sure enough, the light manifested itself that night, eight days after the last occasion. I watched from a distance, afraid to venture any closer. The light lasted perhaps 20 minutes, after which I retrieved the cameras, and you have seen the resulting photographs."

Carnegie stopped there, and we contemplated his words in the eerie silence of the clearing.

It was Vaughan who spoke first. "Corposants," he declared. "Will-o'-the-wisps. Ball lightning. Something of that nature."

"But," I said, "then how do you account for the eight-day cycle and the dead animals?"

Vaughan pulled on his pipe, industriously surrounding himself in a pungent fug of smoke which coiled, blue, in the sunlight. "No doubt natural phenomena, such as ball lightning, might account for small creatures," he said. "But I am perplexed by the eight-day cycle. There

must, by necessity, be a logical, scientific explanation for what occurred here. First, we need to exhaust the probabilities known to the rational, natural world. Only when we have discounted these can we move on to more bizarre hypotheses, which our understanding of science has yet to embrace."

"There is a little more to add," Carnegie went on. "A couple of days following the first incident, I wired Charles in Bombay with a brief account of the event. His letter in reply reached me only the other day. He was sufficiently intrigued to bring forward his annual leave, and should arrive here next week."

We chatted for a while longer, over mugs of coffee laced with brandy, and then Carnegie suggested we make our way back to the Grange. He took us on a roundabout route, passing through Fairweather Cranley and Lower Cranley.

As I walked, I thought back to what Carnegie had told us.

I made a rapid calculation, and then cleared my throat. "If the light does indeed manifest itself on an eight-day cycle," I said, "and it first appeared, as far as you're aware, 24 days ago... then it should be due to reappear tonight."

Carnegie was smiling. "Why do you think I invited you down here yesterday?" he asked. "If the light does appear, then it really would be too great an opportunity to miss." He indicated a cutting in the hedge.

We arrived at the Grange as the sun was setting light to a spinney on the far horizon and a full moon was rising in the east, as insubstantial at this early hour as a paper doily; later, when we set off for Hopton Wood, it would cast an even stronger light to guide our way.

Over a dinner of jugged hare and baked potatoes, accompanied by two bottles of Carnegie's excellent claret, we formulated a plan of action.

"It is essential that we take the cameras in order to have an objective record of what we might find," Vaughan said. "Our subjective senses cannot be relied upon in times of stress, even if there are three of us to corroborate each other's story."

"I'll pack supplies," Carnegie said. "Coffee and brandy, as well as bed rolls. There is no need for us to go without."

"How far from the actual clearing do you think we should place ourselves?" I asked. "Considering what happened to the animals..."

Vaughan turned to Carnegie. "How far away were you when the blast rendered you unconscious?"

"On the very edge of the clearing itself."

"It's very difficult to judge," Vaughan said. "Perhaps it would be wise to put the solidity of a tree trunk between ourselves and the clearing, so that when – or rather if – the light appears we will be afforded some measure of protection."

I nodded. "That sounds like a sensible idea."

Carnegie looked across the room at the grandfather clock. It was 9.30. "It's high time we were setting out, gentlemen."

While he filled three haversacks with provisions and

bed rolls, Vaughan and I fetched cameras and tripods from the room next to my bed-chamber. Ten minutes later we pulled on our overcoats and left the Grange, following the tracks we had made earlier that day, which now showed as dark streaks leading uphill through the moonlit snow-field. Speaking for myself, I was more than a little light-headed from the wine I had consumed at dinner, and at the prospect of what might lie ahead.

At one point, as we trekked up the incline, burdened down with cameras and tripods, I could not help but laugh out loud.

Beside me Vaughan said, "What amuses you, Jonathon?"

"It's just occurred to me what we are doing," I said. "If I'd told myself, a week ago, that I'd be toiling up a snow-covered hillside in order to photograph some mysterious light in an ancient forest... I don't think I would have believed a word!"

"We might," Carnegie declared portentously, "be on the verge of a momentous discovery."

"Or then again," Vaughan put in, "we might be embarking upon the proverbial wild goose chase."

Panting, Carnegie enquired, "You don't doubt that I did see something in the woods eight days ago?"

"Oh, I don't doubt that you saw something, Carnegie. But I rather think that that something might turn out to have a simple and rational explanation."

Like this, with much good-humoured banter and speculation, we made our way towards the wood and, one hour later, reached the tree-line.

We paused to catch our breath and consume coffee fortified with a shot of brandy. In the light of a paraffin lamp, Carnegie consulted his fob watch. "Eleven-fifteen," he said. "We ought to press on if we're to reach the clearing by midnight."

Carnegie led the way through the darkened wood. It was well that he had bethought himself to bring along the lamp, for the moon shone only intermittently through the cover of the trees. The orange flame flared up ahead, sending grotesque shadows dancing lively gavottes all about us. I brought up the rear, behind Vaughan's substantial form, and I must admit to experiencing a spine-tingling *frisson* at the thought of the expanse of dark forest that lay in my wake.

Ten minutes later we gained the clearing.

It possessed a magical quality that it had lacked earlier in the day, for the pewter light of the moon gilded its every detail like a stage set. I stood upon its perimeter, reluctant, now that the time had arrived, to set foot within its mysterious precincts. Carnegie had no such qualms. He looked at his watch and declared, "Ten to midnight. We had better look sharp."

Together we set up the three cameras on their tripods, equidistant apart so as to form the points of a triangle, and Carnegie primed the mechanical devices to activate the cameras at intervals.

As we went about the clearing, I paused to note the effect of the place upon my skin. Sure enough, the hairs on the back of my hands were bristling, and I was aware

of a certain heat alien to the ambient coldness of the rest of the wood.

Not soon enough for me we had the cameras set up, and retreated from the clearing. Vaughan marched back along the path and paused perhaps five yards away.

"This looks as good a place as any." He indicated a fallen tree trunk, which would provide some measure of cover. We positioned ourselves behind a mossy log and spread out the bed rolls, Carnegie breaking out the coffee and the brandy bottle. From where I sat, I had a clear view of the moon-lit clearing, the three cameras standing there like incongruous interlopers upon this sylvan scene.

From time to time Carnegie dragged his deerstalker from his balding head and mopped his brow, when not nervously consulting his fob watch. Vaughan proceeded, with commendable calm and patience, to fill the bowl of his pipe and set the aromatic blend alight. Soon he was puffing away, as if ensconced in an armchair in the domestic comfort of his front parlour.

I, for my part, was overcome with an intense nervousness. It was all I could do to stop myself from cowering behind the log. Against my better judgement, I kept watch on the clearing.

An eerie calm and silence pervaded. Our measured breath provided the only sound. The minutes seemed to take an age to pass.

At last Carnegie broke the silence, startling me. "It's twelve-ten," he announced, peering at his watch.

"Perhaps," Vaughan whispered, "last week's was the final *son et lumière*?"

"I must admit," I whispered in return, "that I cannot bring myself to feel much disappointment."

"Are you sure that the light manifested itself at midnight precisely on the previous occasions?" Vaughan asked.

"To the best of my knowledge, a matter of minutes either way," Carnegie said.

Another five minutes elapsed, and I experienced a perverse sense of anti-climax – contrasting with my earlier fear – that our vigil would come to nothing. I knew that, in the cold light of day, I would rue the fact that we had missed the witnessing of something extraordinary.

I glanced back at the clearing, and at this precise moment it happened.

The light exploded from nowhere – or, rather, it expanded from a point source that seemed to hang in mid-air six feet above the clearing. One second all was stillness and moonlight, and the next a great coruscating membrane of brilliant lapis lazuli light filled my vision. In a fraction of a second it expanded into a vast oval perhaps 20 feet high and half as much across, and with it came a blast of heated air that singed my face. Carnegie shouted aloud as his deerstalker was snatched from his head and blown into the undergrowth. Vaughan gazed ahead in slack-jawed surprise, and I too stared in wonderment at the thing in the clearing.

"Oh, my God..." Carnegie whispered to himself.

I felt an excited grip on my elbow: Vaughan, his face washed in the electric glow from the clearing.

Together, transfixed, we could do nothing but gape at the great swirling oval of sapphire brilliance that hung



in the air of the clearing.

Only then did I become aware, by degrees, of the low droning sound which accompanied the light: it was the almost sub-audible note of an electric generator, an effect felt more in the diaphragm of the torso than in that of the middle ear. It seemed to throb to a rhythm which, I noted, had its counterpart in the steady brightening pulse of the light itself.

Carnegie was on his feet now. As I glanced at him, he stretched out his arm and pointed. "Look!" he cried.

"Good Lord," Vaughan breathed.

I was struck dumb as I beheld that which had provoked the cries of my friends.

There was no doubting it: I could discern a series of shapes moving behind the membrane of the light. Tall, man-like figures passed back and forth, like the grotesque, elongated caricatures in an Indonesian shadow play. They were fleeting, and faint, but indubitably present – perhaps as many as four distinct figures moving with mysterious and ill-defined purpose behind the illumination.

Then, before I could stop him, Carnegie had stepped over the log and was approaching the light.

"Get back here, man!" Vaughan cried, transfixed, like myself, by either fear or fascination.

Carnegie entered the clearing, and in an effect at once terrifying and comic, I saw the little hair that he possessed stand upright in the strange energy field created by the supernal oval.

He was moving ever closer, his right arm raised as if to shield his face from the intense heat.

"Carnegie!" I yelled, and then forced myself from the paralysis that had pinned me to the spot.

I vaulted the log and sprinted forward. The energy belting from the light was intense. I felt my hair stand upright, and the heat burn my exposed face. I raised an arm to protect myself and staggered forward. Behind the light, I fancied that I saw the singular figures pause in their business and turn to peer through at us. I reached Carnegie and grabbed at his arm; he resisted me, shrugged off my hand.

"Don't you see!" he yelled, beside himself in some transport of ecstasy. "Don't you understand, Langham? They represent all that is powerful, all that is knowledgeable! If I could only join them!"

With a strength that seemed super-human, he pushed me off again and strode on. His absurd brandy glass physique was silhouetted against the light as he sought to leave this world for good. Behind me, Vaughan called at the top of his lungs and dived forward. He caught Carnegie just as he was about to step into – or maybe even *through* – the field of light, and I have no doubt that Vaughan's timely intervention saved Carnegie from an unknown fate.

At that second, as Vaughan wrestled his friend to the ground, the light collapsed with a great inrushing roar of air, diminished to a tiny point no larger than a mayfly, and then popped out of existence.

What followed, the events of the next hour or two, are

unclear in my mind. In a daze we left the clearing and somehow made it across the snow-covered downs to the Grange, where we collapsed exhausted in the library and sought resuscitation in copious drafts of wine.

"The light," Carnegie said. "I almost..."

"Be still," I counselled, forcing wine past his lips. His face was red and raw from the heat of the light, and Vaughan and I took turns in bathing his exposed flesh with wet towels.

"There were figures behind the light, moving figures!" He stared, in either wonder or fright. "Tell me I'm not dreaming, man!"

Vaughan said, "We saw them, too. There can be no denying that."

I shook my head. "But what were they, Vaughan? What on Earth did we experience back there?"

Vaughan smiled to himself. "What on Earth, indeed. Or what not on Earth..."

"There were intelligences behind the light," I went on. "We cannot deny that. It was no mere natural phenomenon, such as we supposed before."

"But what *was* the light?" Carnegie asked.

"Perhaps," Vaughan offered, "it was a portal between worlds, between this dimension and the next, and the figures we saw were the dwellers in that mysterious realm."

My head swirled; I had the urge to laugh and cry at the same time. "What in God's name have we stumbled upon!"

"What indeed," Vaughan said quietly.

Carnegie stirred himself. "Next week... in eight days from now, the process will repeat itself. Promise me that you'll return! We must investigate this further!"

Vaughan glanced my way, then nodded to Carnegie. "We'll be here, rest assured on that score, old friend. We'll be here."

It was almost dawn before we talked ourselves into exhaustion and retired to our rooms, and midday when we awoke and gathered in the library for a late breakfast. There we once again went over the events of the night before, and made plans to return within the week.

We resolved to keep our discovery to ourselves, and at two o'clock Vaughan and I left Carnegie – scarred and battered from his encounter with the inexplicable, but otherwise unbowed – and arrived in the capital as darkness was falling.

My life in London, the novel I was attempting to write, now seemed distant and unreal, the stuff of another life entirely.

One week later I met Vaughan outside Waterloo station and we drove from London through a heavy fall of snow that made the roads treacherous and the going painfully slow.

The back seat of his Austin was loaded with a large timber box which he told me was a home-made Morse machine, with which he hoped to communicate with the beings beyond the blue light. He had also penned a 10,000-word treatise on the history of the human race, which he had sealed in a Jacob's Cream Cracker tin. He informed me that he intended to hurl the tin through the

portal, should it happen to open again.

It was almost six o'clock by the time we reached Cranley Grange. For the last hour our progress through the narrow, snow-bound lanes had been slowed even further by the rapidly deepening twilight.

The library, with Jasper Carnegie roasting his brandy glass physique before the fire, was a welcome greeting as we staggered through the French windows with our baggage and the Morse machine.

"Gentlemen!" Carnegie cried at the sight of us, pouring two stiff measures of brandy and thrusting them our way. He was already the worse for drink, rapidly questioning us as to the hardship of our journey and demanding a weather report.

"The snow is coming down without pause," Vaughan told him. "Some of the smaller roads are impassable. An hour later and we might have had to stay the night in Aylesbury."

"And miss the midnight show!" Carnegie cried.

"If," Vaughan reminded him, "the creatures of the light decide to favour us tonight."

"Have faith, my friend!" Carnegie laughed, in his finest Micawber-fashion. "Charles and I thought ahead and transported the cameras, bedding and provisions across to the wood this morning, before the worse of the snow came down."

"Charles is here?" I asked. I had not seen Carnegie's younger brother for almost ten years. We had been friends at Cambridge, though I had always found Charles, if pleasant enough, somewhat reserved: he was as unlike his older brother as it was possible to be, in both physical aspect and psychological make-up. Whereas Jasper Carnegie was short to the point of absurdity, Charles was as tall as a grenadier, and wore his handsome good looks with a certain degree of flinching diffidence, which gave him a continual manner of stammering apology.

Charles had studied medicine at Cambridge, and upon graduating had sailed to India, where he now worked as a surgeon in a military hospital in Bombay.

"He's upstairs, changing for dinner," Carnegie said now. "He'll be down to join us presently." He glanced at his fob watch. "Almost seven," he reported. "I suggest we clean up, have dinner, and then draw up a plan of action."

He showed us to our respective rooms, and while I washed and changed I considered the night's imminent vigil. After the familiarity of London life, the everyday ordinariness of domestic routine, I still found the juxtaposition of this and the fantastic a little hard to believe: it was almost as if at any second I might wake up and discover the incidents at Hopton Wood to have been a dream – or more likely some collective hallucination or illusion. Had I alone witnessed the blue light, then I would surely have doubted not only my senses but my sanity.

My reverie was interrupted by a soft knocking upon the door.

"Come," I said.

The door edged open and a head appeared nervously in the gap.

"Charles!" I said. "Good to see you, man! It must be ten

years or more!"

"A decade almost to the month, Jonathon. You haven't changed a bit."

Would that I could have said the same for my friend. As he ducked through the door and stepped towards me, hand proffered with characteristic diffidence, I saw that ten years, or else the depredations of the subcontinent, had wrought substantial changes upon his person. I recalled him as tall and slim, but now he was stooped and thin to the point of emaciation. His face was lean, his cheeks sucked in to reveal the bones beneath, and his once fine head of hair was receding.

I could not hide my shocked expression.

"Malaria," he informed me. "And just a month ago a brush with dysentery. A while in England should do the trick."

"When did you arrive back?"

"Flew in stages from Bombay," he said. "The last leg from Paris to London yesterday. I... I received Jasper's cable last month, and frankly didn't know what to believe."

"I sometimes think the same," I said. "And I witnessed the phenomenon with my own eyes."

Charles hesitated. He had the nervous habit of plucking at his prominent Adam's apple, a gesture I recalled from his student days. "That's what I wanted to see you about, actually."

"The light?"

"More Jasper," he said. "I must confess to being a little concerned about him."

"I assure you that he hasn't taken leave of his senses," I said. "We really did witness everything he claimed."

"It's not so much the veracity of his claims that concern me, rather his wild plans concerning the phenomenon."

I sat down on the bed and Charles accommodated himself on a nearby stool.

"Go on," I said.

"Well, on the few occasions I've seen Jasper over the past few years, he has always appeared the model of sobriety, quiet and somewhat staid. Imagine my surprise when I met him yesterday. He seemed hyperactive, possessed of an illimitable nervous energy. And he seems never to be without a drink."

"What we saw in the woods would drive a saint—" I began.

Charles was plucking at his Adam's apple *pizzicato* fashion. "Jasper surmised that the light represents some kind of portal or doorway which might conceivably lead to another realm – don't ask me where: he isn't clear on this point. However, what he does seem certain about is that this other place represents an improvement upon our own reality. Don't ask me to unravel the logic of his presumption. I think he believes that because these beings possess the ability to manufacture the blue portal, then somehow their world is therefore more advanced not only mechanically, but culturally and morally also. At any rate, that's what he seems to think."

"I can see that his thesis might not hold water," I said. "But I'm not sure that I would worry too much about it, if I were you."



"I wouldn't worry at all," Charles went on, "if that were the extent of his rantings."

I felt the sudden chill of unease grip me. "What has he been saying?"

Charles rose and strode to the window, where he stood and stared out at the flurry of snow still cascading through the pitch-black night. He turned to me.

"This is between you and me, Jonathon," he said. "But my brother plans to attempt somehow to transfer himself from this world to the other realm via the blue light. I gather that he attempted some such action last week."

"He told you this?"

Charles nodded. "He said that, but for the intervention of Vaughan, he would have walked into the light."

"And likely killed himself in the process," I said. "The heat coming off the interface was terrific. He would have been fried alive upon the instant of contact."

"So you perceive the grounds for my concern, Jonathon. If he attempts the same tonight, and we fail to..."

I nodded. "I'll have a word with Vaughan. Together we'll devise some plan of restraint."

"Perhaps it would be wise not to go through with the vigil?"

I considered his words. "Charles, we are on the verge of discovering something unique, fantastic. It would be a criminal shame to spurn the chance now. Anyway, can you imagine Jasper's reaction if you suggest abandoning the expedition? If we ensure that he is immobilized when the time comes, then all will be well."

Finally Charles nodded. "Splendid. But I felt I had to tell you."

"You did the right thing, my friend."

He pulled at his Adam's apple for a few seconds more, then nodded. He glanced at his watch. "They'll be wondering where we are. Shall we join them?"

When we entered the library, Vaughan and Carnegie were already seated at the dining table, and the former was telling the latter about his Morse machine. It stood beside the table, a mysterious wooden device of lenses and small electric bulbs.

Charles and I seated ourselves and Carnegie introduced his brother to the novelist. The table was already spread with a feast fit for double our number.

"I was just explaining the workings of the Morse machine," Vaughan said, helping himself to slices of roast beef. I followed suit, adding potatoes and parsnips. "We seemed to have arrived independently at the notion that the blue light is some kind of portal between realms, and that communication between the realms is not only advisable but imperative."

I glanced at Charles. "Just so long as it is carried out at a safe distance," I said.

Carnegie seemed not to heed my warning. He was opening a portfolio beside his chair and drawing from it a series of large photographs.

He passed these around the table. "Of much greater clarity and detail than the first lot," he said. "Though I take no claim for that."

The photographs showed the great explosion of light,

rendered white upon these prints, and in three or four pictures the vague outlines of what were unmistakably tall, humanoid shapes.

"These figures," I told Charles between mouthfuls, "were much more clearly defined when seen with the naked eye. They seem almost abstract here. In reality they were frighteningly real."

"I'll vouch for that," Vaughan said. "The photographs quite fail to capture the otherworldly quality of the experience, as I hope you will observe tonight, Charles."

"I'm anticipating the experience with somewhat mixed emotions," Charles said, glancing my way.

"I'm sure that we have nothing to fear, gentleman," Carnegie said. "Surely if the beings beyond the light harboured hostile intentions, then they would have acted before now?"

Vaughan pushed away his plate and considered his empty pipe. He glanced around at us, and there was an air in the room of the expert being asked to propound. "I feel," he said, "that we cannot second-guess the motives of creatures entirely unknown to us. I think that to imbue human rationality to beings manifestly not human might prove to be a grave mistake. My advice would be to assume nothing until we have sufficient proof for an hypothesis."

This set the agenda of the debate for the next hour, with Charles and myself chipping in with our own comments from time to time. I, for my part, wholly agreed with Vaughan, while Charles remained neutral. I could see, however, that from his expression of concern he was worried that his brother's views might prompt him to rash action later tonight, if indeed the blue light appeared.

We had consumed during the course of the meal perhaps more wine than was advisable, and at ten o'clock Carnegie announced, somewhat drunkenly, that we had better think about setting forth.

We donned stout boots, thick overcoats and headgear, and paused before the French window to peer at the blizzard still raging outside. Jasper Carnegie and Charles equipped themselves with a paraffin lamp apiece, and Vaughan and I carried the Morse machine between us.

With Carnegie leading the way and Charles bringing up the rear, we left the Grange and proceeded slowly up the snow-covered incline. It was well that the Carnegies had thought to transport the cameras and provisions to the clearing earlier that day, for I would have resented having to shoulder more of a burden than the Morse machine. The snow was a foot deep in places, far too thick to stride through with ease, and consequently every step was a labour.

With Jasper way ahead, I thought it an opportune time to apprise Vaughan of Charles's fears.

Vaughan heard me out and nodded, his craggy visage illuminated by the light of his glowing pipe. "I thought earlier that we'd better keep an eye on him," he said. "Between the three of us we should be able to forestall any mad dash he might choose to make."

"I can fully understand his being dissatisfied with this world," I said, "but to trust one's future to the blue light

on the off-chance that it might lead to a better one..." I shook my head. "Has the man taken leave of his senses?"

Almost an hour later we came to the edge of Hopton Wood and paused beneath the shelter of a beech tree in order to regain our breath. In the light of the paraffin lamp, Jasper Carnegie's round face was animated. "Do you feel on the cusp of destiny, my friends?"

I glanced at Vaughan. "I trust that our hopes won't be dashed tonight," I said. "We are banking on the beings manifesting the light once more. But what if, for some reason, they decide that they've seen enough of this world?"

Charles said, "The truth to tell, I would be unable to say whether I'd feel relief or disappointment."

"If we were never to see the light again," I said, "then I for one would be disappointed. To have the miraculous appear almost within one's grasp, only to have it cruelly snatched away..."

"You are being unduly pessimistic, gentlemen," Jasper said. "I feel that tonight a breakthrough will be made. Perhaps the appearance of the blue light thus far has been but a prelude, a rehearsal as it were for the true opening of the portal."

Charles stared at his brother. "You think that tonight the beings you saw might actually step through?" He sounded fearful of the prospect.

Jasper laughed. "The wonderful thing is," he said, "that we don't really know what will happen!"

We proceeded into the wood. The going was considerably easier now that we had left the snow behind and we made good time. Ahead, Carnegie's paraffin lamp swung back and forth and sent magical shadows racing this way and that through the contorted shapes of the trees. I was filled with anticipation, and not a little fear. I could not help but hear again Vaughan's warning that we could not second-guess the motives of creatures unknown to us.

Presently we came upon the clearing. There was no full moon to illuminate the arena tonight and the orange glow of our lamps cast it in an altogether more ruddy and eldritch aspect. It was as if I were seeing the clearing for the first time, and thus I noticed stunted trees that I had missed before, as well as the curious absence of ground cover.

The trio of tripod-mounted cameras stood gazing into the centre of the clearing like mute spectators. Carnegie dashed from one to the other, fussily checking and rechecking his calibrations. At last he was satisfied, and returned to where Vaughan and I were setting up the Morse machine. It consisted of a box on legs, with a lens at the front and a lid that hinged and allowed access to its interior. Vaughan was adjusting something within, by the light of a paraffin lamp which I held high. Five minutes later he was finished, and we retreated from the clearing and settled ourselves behind the fallen log.

Carnegie distributed brandy-laced coffee, and I huddled in my bed-roll and warmed my hands on the brew.

"Have you remembered your missive to the beings?" I enquired of Vaughan.

From the deep pocket of his tweed great coat he extracted the Jacob's Cream Cracker tin, which he

opened to reveal a scroll of quarto, weighted with a sizeable stone. "At the first available opportunity," he said, "I shall attempt to communicate with the creatures."

"And perhaps next week," I said with levity, "we might receive a reply contained in just as singular a casing."

"Fifteen minutes to midnight," Carnegie reported, squinting at his fob watch. "All quiet so far."

Vaughan and I had positioned ourselves on either side of Carnegie, in case he might attempt another rash move towards the light. Vaughan winked at me as Carnegie gave the time signal, reminding me to be vigilant.

Midnight came and went. "Don't be downhearted, gentlemen. Remember last week: it was almost a quarter past the hour when the portal appeared."

As minute after minute elapsed, I willed the light to appear, for something to happen. I think we all did, and the tension in the air, along with nascent disappointment, was almost palpable.

Twelve-thirty came and went, and I settled deeper into my bed-roll. Charles began talking of his time in India, telling Vaughan of his experiences of working as a medic for the Raj.

"Did you encounter much opposition to the British rule out there?" I asked.

"It is constant among the educated Indian classes, and rightly so," Charles stated. "I give the Raj another ten years, 15 at the most, before the subcontinent is granted self-rule, and no bad thing."

Their voices lulling me, I slipped into sleep.

I awoke a little later; Carnegie informed me that it was one o'clock. Vaughan and Charles were still conversing, evidently about the portal.

"But if it does manifest itself," Charles was saying, "and we do somehow establish communication with the beings, then how should we proceed? Have you considered the protocol of the situation? I mean, should we make our finding public? Whom should we tell?"

Vaughan stared at him, his face grim in the light of the lamps. "We should keep the findings to ourselves until such time as we can discern the motives of the beings," he said. "I would be loath to tell the world and his wife immediately."

"I was thinking more in terms of informing the relevant government body," Charles said.

"I rather think," Vaughan replied, "That his Majesty's Government has yet to set up a department for trans-dimensional affairs! And anyway, what if these beings are innocent and peace-loving? Surely you'd be the last one to advocate our government getting wind of the portal? By God, they'd be through in no time and subjugating the natives there just as in India..."

I dozed again, only to be woken by a hand shaking my shoulder. "What?" I cried, sitting upright. Charles too had been dozing, and looked as startled as I.

Vaughan said, "It's almost three, gentlemen. I've been discussing with Jasper the wisdom of beating a retreat. What do you think?"

"I'm happy to remain till dawn," I said. "Perhaps the creatures are running late."



Charles nodded. "I haven't come this far to give up so easily."

"That settles it, then," Jasper Carnegie said. "We stay."

Five minutes later he was pouring more coffee when, suddenly, we were startled by a brilliant flash of sapphire light from the clearing, and the sudden raging gale of intense heat. I turned and saw the portal expand and hang in the air, accompanied as before by the almost inaudible thrumming sound that vibrated within my chest.

"My God!" I said.

Charles stared in slack-jawed wonder, unable to bring himself to exclaim aloud.

His brother, for his part, was struggling to his feet. Vaughan and I did likewise, and each held him by a shoulder. He seemed totally oblivious to our restraining grip, being more intent on the pulsing portal not 30 feet before us.

"It's come again!" he cried. "I'd almost given up all hope!"

It was even more magnificent in reality than the image I retained of it in my memory. It seemed larger than I recalled – or, on this occasion, had its circumference definitely swelled? I had thought the oval on the first occasion to be in the region of 20 feet high and half again across; now it stood perhaps 30 feet high, its lower ellipse beginning in the air at the height of a man, and its top-most curve lost in the treetops. It pulsed and shimmered with the same effulgent lapis lazuli light as before, but was it this time more intense? Perhaps my thwarted anticipation invested it with greater properties, now that it had actually deigned to show itself.

One thing was for sure: none of us had ever perceived its like in the everyday natural world, and we stood agape like children as it radiated before us.

Carnegie strained against our grip, his eyes almost popping to take in the details. "I see no shadow-beings this time," he observed.

Vaughan said, "They did not show themselves immediately on the first occasion, as far as I recall."

I stared at my friends. In the electric wash of the portal's light, their faces were transformed, thrown into stark shadow, their expressions of mingled fear and wonder seemingly exaggerated as if by the pen of some phantasmagorical caricaturist. No doubt my expression was likewise distorted; certainly, I was hardly in control of myself. My heart beat wildly, fit to burst, and my limbs were taken by a violent trembling that I could not quell.

Charles, until that second standing beside us behind the fallen tree, at that moment climbed over the trunk and stared in astonishment. At first I thought that, like his brother on the first occasion, he too was being drawn by some hypnotic compulsion towards the portal; but my fear was quashed as he halted, then looked back at us and shook his head in wonder.

Jasper struggled to join his brother, but we held him back. "Easy!" Vaughan counselled. "You will gain nothing from getting too close!"

Carnegie made some half-strangled noise in protesting reply, but did not increase his struggle. Still, Vaughan and I were gainfully employed in keeping him

at a safe distance.

I noticed that the cameras were clicking away, and that Vaughan's Morse machine was projecting its series of coded messages. I wondered what the beings behind the light – if indeed there were any beings there tonight – made of the code, or of the staring cameras, or if indeed they were aware of our own shadowy presence among the trees.

"There!" Charles cried, pointing. "Did you see...?"

Indeed I had; within the light, but fleetingly, I had observed a shape: it was tall, its limbs monstrously elongated like some attenuated creation by Giacometti. It appeared briefly at the periphery of the oval interface, face on, for all the world as if it were staring out at ourselves and our world. Then, just as quickly as it appeared, it retreated off-stage again, frustrating us.

We were not disappointed for long, however; a minute later not one but three humanoid shapes showed themselves. They seemed to float across the face of the portal, two tall figures and a third, this one perhaps half the other's height. The tall creatures' arms appeared longer than they should have, gangling tentacles reaching almost to their knees, if indeed they possessed such human features.

"Charles!" Vaughan cried, startling me. "Here!"

Charles spun around, and, on realizing what Vaughan intended, joined us behind the fallen tree. He held his brother's arm while Vaughan, relieved of custodial duty, drew the biscuit box from his greatcoat and climbed over the trunk.

I watched, my heart racing, as Vaughan approached the interface.

I realized then, and it struck me again later, that this must rank as one of the most primitive, not to say absurd, attempts at communication in the history of our race. There was something at once wonderfully courageous, and at the same time pathetically optimistic, in the sight of a man with a biscuit tin endeavouring to effect inter-species dialogue with beings in control of technology at which we could only marvel.

Vaughan was approaching the interface by painful degrees. He had one arm raised to cover his face, the other drawn back in order to launch the biscuit tin. At last he could approach no further, the energy of the portal beating him back, and he chose this instant to hurl the tin towards the blue light.

I watched the track of its trajectory, its slow arc against the pulsing glow, and it seemed to take an age to arrive at its destination.

And then, of a sudden, it made contact and, instead of passing through as we had hoped and Vaughan had planned, it seemed to hang for long impossible seconds in the membrane of light before bursting into sudden and voracious flame.

"And to think," I called out to Charles, "that that might have been the fate of your brother!"

Between us, Jasper seemed not to have noticed my words. He was straining forward, seemingly oblivious of the fate of the biscuit tin.

Vaughan beat a quick retreat and joined us behind the

trunk.

His face was red raw from the heat of the interface, and the reek of singed hair hung about his person. "So much for that little idea," he muttered. "Let's hope the Morse machine effects better results."

Jasper cried aloud. "But if it is indeed a portal between the realms, then how is it possible to step across?"

"Maybe your speculation the other week was correct," Vaughan said to me, "and the beings can tolerate great heat."

"But are they going to step into our world?" Charles asked.

Perhaps Charles and I had relaxed our grip on Jasper, assuming that even he would not now venture forth towards the interface, having witnessed the fate of the biscuit tin. If so, then we assumed in error. No sooner had Jasper perceived a lessening of our grip, than he pulled himself free and bounded over the fallen log.

I have no real notion of what his intentions might have been as he staggered across the clearing towards the portal, the shadow of his plump person thrown back towards us in elongated exaggeration.

Before we could shout aloud in warning, much less move ourselves to effect a rescue, Jasper Carnegie was within feet of the light.

I am certain that his life was saved a second time – not by Vaughan on this occasion, however – by pure happenstance. For whatever reason, the beings in control of the interface chose that precise second to effect a change in the nature of the membrane.

As we stared, convinced that we were about to see our friend reduced to ashes, the blue light vanished...

It did not, as on the other occasions, shrink to a point and pop from existence. This time, the light disappeared but was replaced by something equally fabulous – if not more so, to judge by subsequent events.

Just as it seemed that Jasper Carnegie was about to take a flying leap into perdition, the blue light changed instantly and became a scene of midnight calm. Not only the light ceased, but also the heat, and the low thrumming vibrato, and instead there came from the portal an absolute silence, and then the waft of a warm wind freighted with some heavenly, otherworldly scent such as I had never experienced before.

Jasper, brought up short by the transformation, came to a comical halt and stared.

Vaughan and I, released from stasis, ran forward and wrestled Jasper to the ground. We caught him by surprise, and his opposition was minimal; we succeeded in hauling him from the clearing and back behind the fallen trunk, where we gathered ourselves and took stock of the situation.

As my eyes adjusted to the sable membrane of the interface, in contrast to the blinding blue of earlier, I realized with amazement that the portal now framed a scene, an otherworldly landscape, much as a picture frame encloses a canvas: but no earthly canvas had ever depicted such a scene as this!

"Oh, my God..." Vaughan breathed in awe.

"What is it?" Charles said.

"Perhaps," I ventured, "the blue light was just a precursor to this, a stage through which the process had to pass before the true other world was revealed."

For through the portal we made out what could only have been another world. It was in darkness, but as we stared we gradually discerned a string of lights around what might have been a bay, for the lights were duplicated with a ripple effect on the surface of the water. Around the shore stood dwellings, but dwellings the like of which were novel to us. They were bulbous and squat, like wasps' nests, with circular lighted windows positioned centrally upon their protuberant walls.

"Perhaps," Vaughan speculated, "this is some far future vision..."

I pointed, my hand trembling as I did so. "If this is the future of our planet," I said, "then how do you account for those?"

For riding high in the sky of this tranquil scene were two large moons, one quite orange and the other crimson.

"Perhaps," I said, "now that the heat is no more, we might take a closer look?"

We glanced at each other, desire fighting with trepidation as we considered the advisability of a closer inspection.

Jasper was the first to speak. "I can see no harm in doing so," he said, "so long as we stay together. We might even chance a step through to the other side."

"Let's merely take a look, first," Vaughan cautioned.

"I'll second that," Charles said.

We released Jasper and moved cautiously from behind the log, walking in line four abreast towards the magically transformed interface.

We slowed as we neared the alien scene. The warm wind was stronger here, and with it the fragrant scent; it reminded me of honeysuckle, but with an undertone of spice.

I heard a sound, then: the gentle lapping of water, and the distant calling of what might have been an animal.

Vaughan placed a restraining hand on my arm as I ventured near. "The interface was opened for a purpose," he said. "Perhaps in order for beings to pass from the other side. Beware!"

"I see no one abroad," Charles said. "There's no sign at all of the earlier figures."

We were perhaps five yards from the portal now, and edging closer like children playing dare with the waves of the ocean. I expected the strange beings to appear at any second and accost us.

The closer we came to the portal, so the wider our view of the strange land became. By the light of the double moons I made out a range of hills to the right, dotted with lights that I took to be dwellings. I wondered what manner of being might inhabit this place.

Jasper Carnegie was closest to the portal. Its lower lip hung at the height of his head. He stood on tip-toe and peered over. "I see the ground," he reported. "Some kind of dark, coarse sand."

I joined him and looked over the lip. What appeared to be a beach shelved down to the water; on the black sand sprouted many-headed silver blooms, which glowed in

the moonlight.

More than anything I wanted to suggest that we climb through for a closer investigation, but at the same time a more cautious part of me recalled Vaughan's words. The portal had been opened for a purpose; it would not do to be apprehended by the controllers of the interface.

"Look," Vaughan said. "There, in the sky."

We looked up. Something passed before the double moons, some kind of flying machine. As we watched, it turned and headed towards the bay. It was like a plane without wings, a graceful tear-drop shape that moved with alarming speed. Indeed, hardly had I observed this than I realized that it was heading directly for the portal.

It swooped low over the bay, skimming the surface, and at speed approached the interface. Charles gave a cry and dived to pull his brother out of the way, lest he be decapitated by the hurtling craft.

I ducked along with Vaughan, but not before witnessing yet another remarkable sight. Along the beach, two tall, attenuated figures appeared from the darkness and ran towards the portal.

Seconds later, with an eerie drone, the tear-drop craft flashed overhead and into our world. It side-swiped the trunk of the first tree in its path, caromed off a second and gouged a great furrow in the undergrowth mere feet from the log behind which my friends and I had earlier taken refuge.

No sooner had it come to rest than a segment of its upper integument flipped open and a being struggled out, no doubt dazed from its crashlanding.

I had no time to register the appearance of this creature before I made out sounds behind me and, on turning, saw the appearance of the two tall creatures above the lip of the portal. I felt rough hands grab me, and thought for a second that a third member of their party had waylaid me, until I heard Vaughan hiss into my ear, "Hide yourself, man!" and so saying dragged me to the floor and pulled me along the ground towards where Jasper and Charles were cowering beneath the great hovering ellipse of the portal.

From this relative sanctuary, we watched the drama enact itself before us.

The being from the craft had managed to jump free and hide behind the fallen tree trunk: it was an ugly little brute, a dwarfish manikin with a great domed head, no neck worth mentioning, and a thick torso. No sooner had I made this inventory than it disappeared from sight, evidently attempting to conceal itself from the two elongated beings in pursuit.

For here they came now, swarming over the lip of the portal and landing – mere feet from where we cowered – with a sinuous, lizard-like agility. It was all I could do not to shout aloud in terror, for if the first manikin had possessed all the hallmarks of ugliness, then these creatures were a match and more besides.

Their legs were long and thin, but bent as if in readiness to spring: they reminded me of the legs of lizards, scaled and oleaginous – as was the rest of their anatomies. They stepped forward, and walked with a

cautious, bobbing gait, heads flicking this way and that. They carried what I assumed were weapons, silver, stylized things like futuristic rifles. Their headpieces were encased in globular helmets, so that it was impossible to make out their faces, but if the rest of their bodies were any indication, than I imagined the elongated jaws and snouts of the saurian genus.

By some method of detection unknown to me, the leading saurian aimed its weapon at the fallen trunk and fired.

A beam of white light sprang from the nozzle of the weapon and made short work of the trunk, which vanished in a blinding glow. I caught a quick glimpse of the stunted being as it rolled from its now non-existent cover and took refuge behind its flying machine.

Another white beam sprang forth, this time from the dwarfish manikin. It struck the leading lizard, which hardly had time to issue a guttural cry before it vanished in an inferno of blinding light.

Its mate ran to the edge of the clearing and fired again, and I heard a cry from behind the flying machine as its erstwhile pilot received a hit – but not before loosing an almost simultaneous beam of light which found its target: the second saurian flashed before us and vanished in an instant, and seconds later I made out the charcoal reek of cooked flesh pervading the air of the clearing.

All was still, quiet, in the aftermath of the extraordinary battle played out before our disbelieving eyes.

I was lying on the ground, face down, with Vaughan and Charles beside me, and Jasper to my rear. My pulse was racing and I was trembling with fear and exhilaration. My mouth was so dry that words would not come, and my mind was racing as it sought to explain the nature of the events we had witnessed.

Jasper was the first to move. Slowly he crawled forward, past us and beneath the lip of the portal. He stood cautiously and looked around him. He walked towards where the first lizard-like beast had met its end, and bent to inspect what little remained, a mere scattering of ashes upon the ground.

As I watched him, I made out a movement beyond the clearing. I opened my mouth to call a warning, but words would not come. As I stared, pointing, I saw the stunted manikin crawl out from behind its tear-drop craft. It was on all fours, in evident distress, and hauled after it a weapon not dissimilar to the lizards' silver rifles.

It collapsed onto its stomach, facing us, then raised its rifle and aimed.

"Watch out!" Vaughan cried to Jasper, who stood oblivious to the danger he was in.

But the manikin did not intend Jasper as its target. It fired, aiming high, and above us the interface detonated with an explosion of blue light.

We cowered with our arms about our heads as intense heat and sparks rained all around us.

Seconds later, it was over. A preternatural silence reigned; only the dim light of the stars provided meagre illumination. Jasper fell to the ground and scrambled back to us.

"It still lives!" he hissed. "For all we know it might be a berserk mercenary bent on slaughter!"



"It would have wiped us out by now, if that were the case," Vaughan pointed out. "We're sitting ducks."

I noticed, not ten feet from where I lay, a paraffin lamp which had fallen and extinguished itself in the *melée*. Cautiously I crawled across to it, found matches in my pocket and set about providing a light.

My friends joined me and, huddling together within the orange glow of the lamp, we peered into the darkness in the direction of the injured manikin.

Presently my vision adjusted and I made out the small figure lying face down beside its craft.

Only then did I hear its cries. They were in a tongue wholly incomprehensible to the human ear, and yet even so heartrendingly pitiful. They sounded like the hopeless mewling of a trapped kitten, and yet with a sense of structure, like some form of language.

"Eeee, ah rah-na... Vee-ha. Ka!"

Charles took my elbow in vice-like grip. "What should we do, for pity's sake!"

Vaughan said, "Let us approach, but slowly. Raise our arms in the air, to signal that we mean it no harm. Then we might get close enough to assess the degree of its injuries and determine whether it might be saved."

We nodded encouragement to each other, and yet each of us was reluctant to make the first move. After perhaps half a minute of vacillation, first Jasper and then Vaughan stepped forward and slowly approached the manikin. Charles and I followed cautiously, myself ready to flee at the first sign of hostile intent from the creature.

In the light of the lamp, I stared at the manikin. It looked up, regarding us with great round, seemingly lidless, eyes.

It still held its rifle, and as we drew near the manikin moved. It lifted the weapon, and we froze, fully expecting to be reduced to ashes. Then the being flung the rifle with all its feeble strength into the undergrowth, and with that simple gesture signalled its lack of hostility.

We hurried forward. Jasper took the lamp and held it high while Vaughan and Charles with painstaking care examined the manikin, and then eased it on to its back.

I stared. Evidently the beam of light had not scored a direct hit – otherwise the being would have been annihilated like its opponents – but had caught the manikin a glancing blow. The flesh of its right hip and upper torso was a flash-burned mess, with pale spars of broken bones projecting through the wound.

Charles produced a pen-knife and proceeded to cut away, ever so gently, the creature's jerkin. "*Rah-na... Vee-ha*," it mewled in pain.

I turned away, unable to watch any more. I was standing beside the tear-drop shaped craft, its open fuselage inviting inspection. I peered inside, noting many strange devices and implements fore and aft of what looked like a narrow sling or seat.

As I peered within, I happened to touch the skin of the craft, and to my surprise the entire thing rocked. I pushed it again. Sure enough, the craft was astonishingly light. And yet, as I stood back and stared at it, it looked as substantial as anything of its equivalent dimensions on Earth.

My friends were conferring. "I can do nothing for it out here," Charles was saying. "If we can get it back to the

Grange without causing it greater trauma..."

"But if we try to carry it back," Vaughan said, glancing at the doctor, "do you think it will survive the journey?"

"It's our only hope," Charles said.

"One second," I interjected. "What if we replace the creature within the craft?"

Charles interrupted. "It's barely conscious. I doubt if it could control—"

"If we put the creature back in the craft and carry it to the Grange," I finished.

"Carry it?" Jasper echoed.

"Look," I said, and taking the vehicle in two hands lifted it over my head.

"Good God!" Vaughan exclaimed. "Whatever next?"

I lowered the craft next to the alien. Charles knelt and attempted to gesture our intentions to the manikin. "*Hah ro*," it said, which we chose to interpret as assent.

Fortunately the being was as small and light as a child. With Vaughan taking its shoulders, and Charles its legs, while I hoisted the lamp aloft and Jasper held open the cover of the fuselage, we managed to transfer the manikin from the ground and into the sling of its craft with a maximum of care and a minimum of delay.

We agreed to take turns in bearing the craft. Vaughan and I would take the first shift, while Charles and Jasper bore the lamps fore and aft. Later we would exchange duties.

I took the nose of the vessel, Vaughan the rear. At a nod from my friend, I lifted, and proceeded to walk forwards with the ludicrously lightweight craft held at my back.

Like this, bearing the creature in its craft as if it were some injured dignitary in a sedan-chair, we made our way through Hopton Wood.

The going was difficult, mindful as we were of making the ride for the manikin as smooth as possible. We proceeded slowly, choosing our steps with care; the dancing shadows cast by the lamps did not help: the path seemed like an obstacle course with hummocks and protruding roots I had failed to notice when walking unburdened. Nevertheless we walked for 20 minutes without mishap, and then at a call from Jasper slowly lowered the craft to the ground. Charles and his brother took up the burden, back and front respectively, while Vaughan and I carried the lamps.

Twenty minutes later we emerged from the wood and paused before the snowfield that extended away from us, almost violet in the light of the stars. The Grange was a distant irregularity against the whiteness, the lighted French windows of the library promising warmth and comfort at journey's end.

Again Vaughan and I took up the burden, this time myself at the rear and Vaughan in front. We took an experimental step forward, but the depth of the snow impeded a smooth ride for our injured guest. We lurched about like drunken men, the craft rocking perilously to and fro.

"Halt!" Vaughan cried. "I have a better idea. Lower the vehicle."

We did so, and it sat upon the snow like a sledge –

which was precisely Vaughan's intention.

"Now, Charles and Jasper – you stand at the front and make sure it doesn't get away from us. Jonathon, we'll guide it from the rear."

In just such a fashion did we begin the journey down the gentle hillside. The craft skated over the snow like the finest toboggan, the ride far smoother than when Vaughan and I were staggering with the craft. We galumphed through the deep snow alongside, merely having to touch the vessel from time to time in order to keep it on course.

"I've been considering what we saw back there," I said at one point. "Have you any idea as to what was going on?"

Vaughan peered at me over the curved top of the vehicle. "It might be easily explained in a number of ways," he said. "Perhaps what we saw was simply a case of cops and robbers, our friend here being the fugitive. Then again, the reptilian beasts might have been the antagonists, and the homunculus some unfortunate hero."

"Or perhaps," I said, quoting Vaughan himself, "it might be a mistake to impute human motives to alien beings."

Vaughan laughed at this and called out, "*Touché!*"

I marvelled at the cavalier fashion with which we were discussing that which, in the cold light of day, we might come to see as momentous.

"And what about the portal?" Charles said over his shoulder. "What was happening when it was in its blue phase, and who or what were those shadow creatures we beheld?"

"The big question," Vaughan said, "is where the deuce did the portal come from, or lead to, whichever you prefer?"

"The moons in the sky seemed to preclude a future planet Earth," I said.

"Then how about Mars?" Charles offered. "That planet has two moons."

"But one orange and the other red?" Vaughan said.

"It's a possibility we cannot discount," Jasper said. "Who would have thought of it, the red planet...?"

Like this, with much light-hearted banter and speculation back and forth, we made the last leg of the journey towards the lighted library of the Grange.

### Concluded next month

**Eric Brown** still lives in Haworth, West Yorkshire, and is one of *Interzone's* perennially popular contributors. His last stories here were "The Children of Winter" (issue 163 – winner of the British SF Association Award as best story of 2001), "Ascent of Man" (issue 167) and "The Frankenberg Process" (issue 171).

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# Pawn

*Timons Esaias*

What Winstead knew about Squire Yvor was this: the Squire was a pawnbroker. Years ago he had brokered the more important pieces as well – your knights, your rooks – but for several years now it was pawns only. Reliable pawns, but not the most expensive or the most stylish.

What Winstead knew about chess was nothing, but his boss had sent him down here to get some decent material, and suggested that his, Winstead's, job might be on the line. Winstead knew that meant the boss's head was probably pretty close to the block itself. O the times. O the business climate.

The real bitch of it was that he had to physically go to the place, with nothing but a monocle to keep him connected to the datastream. Brokers positively refused to deal material over the publink. Tradition or something. Customer had to get out of their workpit or pentsuite and march down to the shop to take responsibility for the choice themselves. And responsibility was another bitch in this bitchy business. Who took responsibility these days?

Taking responsibility stinks of bad form.

So anyway, there was this going out thing. Pitters like Winstead wore their agoraphobia as a medal of distinction, an effing *croix de salary*. Took him an hour to bring himself to ask his monocle for routing instructions.

And another hour to get started.

Taxi had four-inch armour. "Yeah," the drivebot complained, "had to have this slab a' junk plated with another two inches. All these buildings running a mile high, and they never think of the effect on the driving public. It's no biggie for the trucks, cause they're all down

in the substreets. But stuff falls off those monsters all the time, and smacks the ground pretty hard. City don't care, insurance companies don't care. Guess they both make money off filling in the impact craters. And you can't just armour the top, neither, cause there's no telling what funny ricochets stuff'll take when it comes down."

Winstead toggled the viewcamera up to vertical so he could see the subject being discussed. The sky was a narrow line, interrupted by causeways. If that *was* the sky, and not some balcony lighting. Winstead hoped, suddenly, that it wasn't the sky, so that he'd feel more enclosed. This cab was twice the size of his workpit, though the thought of the armour made it more comfortable. Cosy.

"Say, since I'm taking you to the renowned Yvor's, I should ask you. Are you a player yourself, or just running an errand? I used to play chess myself, with some of my spare processing time, the old chess that is. Not what you folks play today."

Winstead flipped off the viewer. Instantly he felt better. "I'm just rounding up a pawn for a game tomorrow. Our corporation's sponsoring a player in the summer tournament."

"Ah," said the taxi. "So what's at stake in this tournament?"

He didn't respond at first because he didn't know, and then didn't respond because he had never realized that he didn't know.

"Yeah, I know, 'Don't Ask, Don't Think,' right?" The taxi swerved, and then seemed to be on an elevator. "Forget I enquired. There are just two serious games in the world, and at your level chess is it, I bet. Don't worry, just



hope it stays that way. Life only gets tougher if you out-grow chess."

When the cab let him out the door's tunnel didn't mate tightly with the shop entrance, and some street air got in and bothered him. Car stink, and moss stink and what was that stuff plants sometimes grew in? Dirt? Dirt.

That's what he hated about the outside. Things don't fit together outside a building. Corners aren't square and clear, joints don't fit tightly, colour schemes go straight to netherland. It nauseated him, and his head was swimming as he entered the shop. Very odd place, very odd.

"Are you the gentleman from NixFax? Mr Oglestairs, isn't it?"

The voice came from above, and his monocle put the source cross-hairs on a very tall gentleman several dozen yards up. The man was standing on a clear floor, so Winstead was looking at his feet, mostly, and foreshortened body. Even so, he could see the man was very tall.

His monocle also diagrammed the room, which he now understood to be 60 metres high, ten metres long, and three wide. The entire space was solidly walled with display cases containing shelf after shelf of chess sets, old-style chess sets with inanimate pieces. The boards were mounted vertically, behind the set each belonged to. His monocle started counting the sets, but Winstead lost interest before the result came in.

"If you will step onto the hexagram, you can join me in my office," said the man, who took a step into the glass wall beside him and disappeared.

I wish I could do that, thought Winstead. Take one step and just disappear. Instead he took two, and rose on the elepad. Thousands of little kings and queens watched him, their armies seeming ready to move at command.

Squire Yvor proved to be about twelve feet tall, and stood in a depression in his office nook, so that his standup desk seemed normal from the other side. Normal if you were used to seeing a desk, which Winstead wasn't. Only the rich and powerful, or the anachronistic, bothered with work surfaces. This made the swimming sensation in his head even worse, trying to guess which category this broker belonged to.

The next two questions deepened the mystery, because his monocle indicated that the answers were already known to the broker. This old-fashioned wordiness could also be an affectation of power, of pretending not to consult a monocle.

"What piece would you be in the market for?"

"A pawn. A queen's knight pawn, whatever that is."

"And what would you be authorized to spend on this pawn?"

Winstead hesitated, because this was the first point where he could make a huge mistake.

The broker nodded his head slightly, and a tiny but elaborately woven carpet rolled out onto a bench against the side wall. "Please recline, my friend. I understand your hesitation. *I have been given a budget, you are thinking, but how much of it am I really intended to spend. Should I hold back a portion for myself? Should I economize and return a percentage to my employer?*"

Winstead sat on the bench and drew up one leg.

"Let me advise you, then, from my considerable experience," the man said, laying his hands palm up on the desk. Winstead noticed that undisguised scars crossed the palm on the left. "There are two factors I would emphasize. One is that this is obviously your first commission. Another is that tomorrow's game involves a major business agreement. Your corporation is merging with the Moloch-Thanat chikarabatsu. The winners of tomorrow's matches will be the dominant partners in each sector of the new entity."

Why do I learn this now? wondered Winstead. Why am I sent in ignorance on so important a mission?

"In regards to the first point," Squire Yvor continued, closing his left hand, "let me tell you why you are here. Usually when a new person comes in to buy a piece, with a smallish fee, it means that whoever sent this new person is unsure of themselves. If a client has a big budget and a sound position in the company, they come themselves. When the client fears failure, or has not budgeted well, then they send a potential scapegoat."

Winstead could only nod, shakily.

The man gently closed his right hand. "On the second point, I would suggest that this game is too important to skimp on, and that your supervisors would not be happy with the diversion of any funds from the object at hand, even the return of a percentage into their accounts. In the future, very likely, you will be expected to benefit from handling such tasks, but today I suggest that you spend the full 50,000 lucrechts."

Winstead wondered whether the broker made more profit that way, than in helping a buyer skim a bit off the top. He supposed so. But the argument had force.

"As you say. The full amount."

The dealer activated a bit of the desk top, displaying a chess board with various notations in some of the squares. "I took the liberty of finding out the previous choices that have been made. Yours will be the seventh pawn. I see that four of the others are to be Tungpins, which is sadly typical. Everybody goes for the big sword, the dragonslayer cachet. But it gives the set no balance. The other two are a Hanny and a Chang. Did you have a sense of the type of pawn you would prefer?"

Winstead admitted that he did not follow chess at all. "I am afraid I don't really know the different kinds."

The broker stifled a brief moue of disappointment, and studied the diagram. "There would be good value in Litis, or Chungs. Neither is very popular. But your side is deficient in ambiguity. Might I suggest a Lanny? Let me see who is available."

He consulted a list, and muttered about casualties. Winstead vaguely recalled some pop-eds complaining that too many chess games used real weapons these days, but the company pished all over that. Can't play for keeps in the business world with ritual restrictions on the most important encounters. That would encourage insincerity, and insincerity is the death of dividend. A broker, however, would probably not enjoy the combat turnover.

"Yes. I have a proper candidate." The area upon which

he stood and Winstead's bench both became elepads and began to recede into the floor, so he tucked in his other leg. "Follow me."

They emerged in a lobby from which six hallways radiated, and actually walked down one of them past a number of closed doors. Winstead couldn't remember the last time he'd seen an interior doorway sealed.

"The doors are for our protection," observed his host. "Can't have missiles wandering around the hallways."

They entered a room, at last, the broker's robes swinging so wide they brushed the edge of the door, which sent a shudder through Winstead. Perhaps this was graciousness, the walking, the loose robes, the long hallways and closed doors, but it made him nervous. It had been a mistake to leave his workpit, he felt certain now.

The floor was soft, and the broker made a deep bow when stepping onto it. The room seemed far too large, though a shelftite had lowered into it cutting the space nearly in half. A woman stood in front of it, inspecting the amazing array of gunpowder weapons it held. There must have been 200 machine guns, and she had already selected several that were draped from her cloak of body armour.

Her neck guard bore the emblem of a basket of red and white roses with one central black chrysanthemum, which his monocle informed him was the Lanny sigil.

She turned as they approached, and rested the long-barrelled drum-feed gun she had been inspecting on her hip. All the equipment she carried, guns, grenades, ammoclips and mags, rattled quietly on their various hooks as her armour cloak swirled, lost its momentum, and became still.

Something about the way her outfit moved seemed odd. "Is that real fabric?" he blurted.

She gave the broker a look that made Winstead blush, and said, still not looking at him, "Visuwear isn't much good at killing a laser pulse or stopping a bullet."

The broker interjected smoothly. "Our client is not aware of the gritty realities associated with the game of chess. He is, however, prepared to pay full price for your services as a Queen's Knight Pawn in a game between NixFax and Moloch-Thanat tomorrow in the Cassian Fields. I hope that this might be an opportunity you would find acceptable, a challenge worthy of your gifts and training."

Her eyes changed six times during the few moments of the pawnbroker's speech. The changes were more subtle than those Winstead knew from holvid women, but he thought she was both eager and fearful, pleased and calculating. As the pawnbroker bowed slowly after his little speech, she settled into a swordfighter's stance. Only then did Winstead think: this person is trained to kill, and I am hiring her to possibly do so, to kill and to risk death.

His senses sharpened. The guns reeked of light machine oil and linseed oil and leather and neat's-foot oil and primer and gunpowder and cordite and semtex and copper and the distinct solid odour of blued steel and the subtle cool smell of stainless.

The three people had their smells as well; hers were physicality and sandalwoody spirituality; the broker electronic business scent and lemongrass leisure; and Win-

stead, he now realized, stank of the pit and the cab and uncertainty.

The pawn turned to him and asked a direct question, directly. "Unbated weapons?"

Winstead apologized, "I'm afraid..."

"There is no honour in modern chess, o warrior," Squire Yvor observed, in slow clear syllables. "The client class only understands defeat if they can see the blood." The broker shook his head in the manner of a thespian expressing grief. "But there is still duty."

"And self-knowledge," she replied. "Era?"

The broker spread his hands. "Bronze."

She sighed, slightly, and looked down at the gun still braced on her hip. Lovingly, and achingly, she cradled it in her arms. A pietà. She turned away from the two men, placed the gun back on the rack, and shouted "Mycenae!" which caused three things to happen – the gun rack shelftite began sinking into the ceiling, a garment of some kind fell from an overhead trap, and a second rack of shiny, almost golden swords and knives and spears rose up from the floor.

And in the midst of the rising and dropping and sinking, which was making Winstead briefly dizzy, the pawn whipped off her cloak, all the guns and grenades included, in a single gesture with her left hand and tossed it into the sinking gun rack, and with her other hand caught the falling garment and whipped it around her so that only for a moment, if he had been paying attention, was she naked before them. Or had she been tattooed or in all-over lace, or merely shadow? The picture was burned into his mind, though he could not be sure of what he had seen.

The new garment looked like nothing more than a silk burnoose. Her attention was not with them any more, however. Her eyes were on the gleaming gold, the ivory-hafted weapons.

"I accept," she said, but gave them no heed.

All the way home his mind replayed and replayed and replayed that instant when she might have been naked. And he wondered at how decisively she had shocked him, how deeply shaken him. And how casually.

He was glad to be back in his workpit the next morning, effing glad to be interacting over the publink and not looking anybody for thorsake in the face. Winstead didn't even show faces on the commlink, waste of bandwidth, invasion of privacy, and used the simplest cartoon rep. Not much more than a talking kanji, that's how he liked to see folks.

Yesterday had thrown him right out of stride with faces. He kept seeing the pawn's reluctant face when she had to give up that Tommy gun, and the broker's look that said *your-job-is-on-the-line-and-you-don't-have-a-clue-do-you*. Which he hadn't.

And that pawn. The women he knew, and that mostly meant holactors, smiled at a guy no matter how tough they were. Gave a guy a feeling of importance. But she had looked at him the way a programmer looks at client code. And here he sat thinking about chess again.

Task at hand: supervise the adaptation of a CRP-series

robot to the task of collecting and reprocessing the droppings of wild giant sloths in an urban environment. Somebody else's job to get the robot to distinguish a megatherium from a mastodon; and some other department's brief to cleave to sloth droppings while forsaking all others; and not his job either to give it wall-climbing skills so that it could follow the sloths that pulled themselves from balcony to setback in search of munchy vegetation above street level. His task, which chess should never have interrupted for a minute, to keep the CRP from getting clobbered by the nine- or ten-foot megafaunal arm swipe, with the nasty hooked claw attached. Scores upon scores of the competitor's street cleaners had come to crunching grief because they annoyed the giant sloths, and then couldn't clear out fast enough.

Winstead loved this assignment, because he knew it could be done, and any problem had to be with the team integrating the software. No risks. No responsibility. Not a chance of a face-to-face meeting anywhere.

So it annoyed, annoyed terribly, annoyed beyond anything when a flash came down from his supervisor. "Your Presence Required Our Box Cassian Fields 1400 Hours Today."

This chess game is ruining my life, he thought. And he thought of the pawn, his pawn, and how she hadn't cared if he saw her naked. Hadn't cared at all.

"This is the moment of foreboding," said the executive seated just behind him. The NixFax box, high above the chess field, was steeply pitched and entirely glass in front. Winstead felt horribly exposed. Scores of thousands of spectators could see him, his whole body, not just above the neck. "Especially for the pawns, because they *abide* in the *forefront* of the battle line."

"Most wise," Winstead managed to say, nearly strangling on the words. He distracted himself from the huge stadium on the other side of the glass by bringing up a hol of the NixFax side of the board, and looking for his queen knight pawn. He had done a primer on the rules of chess on the way over, but couldn't follow much about it.

About all that he had grasped was that the King was the CEO of the pieces, and the Queen the COO. The pawns were the foot soldiers, the pitters and dataclerks of the game. And each side moved in turn. And when pieces tried to take a square that was already occupied by an opposing piece, they fought, winner take all.

He felt wetness on his knee, cold wetness. His boss leaned over, her arm reaching awkwardly for the seat-back directly below Winstead. Her drink had slopped, and dripped disgustingly over her fingers. It startled him so much he looked into her eyes. The pupils seemed very small.

She caught herself, slurring out, "Interesting choice, a Lanny. Girl, too!" She made an attempt to sit down, but couldn't manage it. "Guess that's all I could expect for 50. Hardware guys spent 200,000 for their pawns." She swore bitterly, then leaned in to whisper spittily in his ear. "Bud-get! We'd have sword guys, if we had that kinda coin."

Winstead had had just about all the personal contact he could manage without screaming, but it got worse. Some

senior manager slid into the place beside him, his tunic embroidered with the badges of four ancient family orders. "Your pawn is moving first, from the sound of it. Larsen's Opening." The man arranged his clothing fussily. "I see she carries a short billhook. Very adaptable weapon."

Out in the stadium a trumpet fanfare was playing, which his monocle explained was signalling NixFax's first move. Which meant that somewhere above him the company's hired chess master, with the help of the Board, had declared a move. And, indeed, Winstead's pawn was preparing to move, and he zoomed in on her.

As the hol grew in front of him, he learned his pawn's name for the first time. Hadn't thought to ask it, before. Hadn't thought she'd have one, somehow.

Artemisia.

The name broke his heart.

A lump stuck in his throat, and the pressure of tears throbbed behind his eyes, all in an instant. He'd put a girl named Artemisia in danger of death because his drunken boss couldn't scrape enough funds out of the budget to get a decent pawn.

How noble she looked. How composed. She was stepping forward, an oval shield with a shining boss held above her head. A tight leather cap with metal cheek-pieces covered that head, and a long silken sheath reached nearly to the ground. She wore a thick quilted jacket, covered with something white and bumpy. An inquiry put diagramicons around her image, explaining that her armour consisted of small clam shells sewn to her jacket, in the style of Bronze Age Scythians; and her underdress was silk, which would not be torn by an arrow or spear, and thus allow them to be extracted easily, by pulling on the silk. A sheathed sword was strapped to her back from left shoulder to right hip. A pair of short spears from right shoulder to left hip. In her hand she held a short stick, almost a wand, with a hook at the end.

She strode forward one square, and then lowered her shield into the rest position. Only then did he realize that she had one foot bare.

The Moloch-Thanat side moved the Queen's Bishop Pawn forward one square, and then the NixFax bishop stepped into Artemisia's first square. Moloch-Thanat responded with the Queen moving, very ceremoniously, one square diagonally.

The manager gasped the moment the next fanfare rang out, the NixFax bishop marching boldly down across the field, a bulky leaden mace in his hand, and disdaining to unhook the shield from his back. This should be no contest, he knew, for bishops are far better trained than pawns, but the dagger the pawn drew looked more deadly than the mace. "If I might ask, good sir," Winstead forced himself to say, "is this move dangerous?"

But even as he put the question the bishop flung the mace with a single sharp gesture. The unfortunate pawn, half hidden under raised shield, was hit squarely on the knee, and not the knee forward, but the one he was bracing on behind, and therefore couldn't move. A sickening crack, heard even through the glass, and the pawn wobbled for a moment on his leading leg, both shield and dagger reaching forward briefly to steady him.



The moment was enough. The bishop's second stroke, upstroke with a blade sheathed in his boot, sent the pawn unconscious or dead to the ground.

There was a scurry of spoils boys as the bishop leaned over the fallen pawn, stripping off his opponent's armour and picking through his weapons for anything useful. The bishop cast aside his own blade, now dulled perhaps, and took the pawn's. He recovered his own mace, and then let the boys put the victim on a stretcher and the prizes on another and haul them away.

"Winstead, isn't it?" the manager finally replied as the boys worked. "What is dangerous is the next move. Their bishop will now attack our bishop, while he is still fresh from a fight. Fortunately our piece didn't have a hard struggle."

And so it happened, and the bishops exchanged hideously crashing blows, until the Moloch-Thanat piece threw a mace at his opponent's face, and missed. In four quick blows the NixFax bishop won again, but two moves later he was knocked unconscious by the trunk of the rook's elephant. Play continued for several moves, when the enemy Queen Rook Pawn stepped into the square diagonal to Artemisia. In reply Artemisia advanced diagonally into the rook pawn's square.

"I'm afraid your investment is about to be squandered to wear down a rook, my friend. Well, let's see how she does."

The opposing pawn threw a spear at Artemisia, missing. She did not throw back, but calmly advanced, holding her small wand at her side. He drew a long dagger, and thrust it at her, and then moved with great suddenness, in an attack Winstead would only see in the repeats. Leaping forward while whipping the blade behind him he brought it down as a chopping weapon, straight for her head. But Artemisia responded by stepping very slightly to one side, hopping onto her bare foot to change her centre of gravity and motion. Her wand rose and hooked above the descending blade, bringing it down even faster than her enemy intended. Yanking backward as his sword hit the ground she made him fall to his knees with the force of his own blow.

As her right hand hooked his sword down, her shield had risen high in the air. Now she turned toward him and brought the edge of it down viciously into his exposed neck.

The blow bent her shield badly, and his seemed too bulky for her, so she let the boys carry them both off. Winstead realized he had been holding his breath, and gasped.

"Not bad." The manager offered Winstead a nibble tray. "But the rook will finish her."

But the rook did not finish her, though as he advanced atop his elephant, it would have been impossible to believe it.

Winstead met his pawn again at the victory reception, his mind still reeling from the few moments with the CEO. The Great Dame herself had bowed to him, had congratulated him on his choice of pawn, had handed him a ferule of honour, had made him understand that he would rise in the new, merged, NixFax-driven chikarabatsu.

But CEOs are one thing, Artemisia another. After the surviving winning pieces, both shoulders bare to empha-

size their strength and one leg exposed to the hip to reveal fitness, had been introduced to the bigwigs; after he had watched her for half an hour; she strode across the room directly to him.

"I wish to thank you, sir," she said, and smiled most sweetly. It took him several seconds to take in what she had said, and that she had said it to him.

"Well, I mean..."

"This chance you gave me means much to my career. I will now be trained as a knight, without having to spend years seeking recognition as a pawn in minor games."

"Well. That is," he stumbled, "you've made my career too."

"Then it was a well-omened day that we met," she replied, with more poetry in her voice than he expected from so attractive a killer. Sensing that he must say something to keep her there, he stammered the first thing he could think to ask.

"Well... but... That is, how did you *do* it? With the elephant, I mean?"

She smiled and leaned forward, her head conspiratorially next to his, the second woman to do this today. "I watch the elephants train. I knew if I touched them with my little hook they'd think it was a mahout goad, and be confused. So, I just gave the elephant the signal to lie down on its side, figuring to catch the rook off guard. His getting pinned under his own mount just made it more dramatic."

Winstead laughed. He had never laughed with a woman before, and certainly never laughed about a real death before, and most certainly never about a death he had paid for, and would be promoted for; but he couldn't think of another thing to say.

I wonder if chess pieces ever marry the managerial class, he was thinking, just getting ready to ask his mon-ocle, when his boss grabbed his arm. Artemisia had bowed and slipped away in an instant, seeing that business was at hand; before he could say anything. Before he could even think anything.

"Don't waste your time getting to know her," the boss said, honey dripping from every word. "Nobody will be sending you to chess games any more. You and I are going to be strictly big leagues from now on. We'll be playing chikarabatsu against the world! We're going to play Go!"

"Are there pawns, in Go?" Winstead asked hesitantly. "Or knights?"

"Nothing of the sort," the boss assured him. "Go pieces are a different type altogether, much more austere. No overlap at all."

He turned his head furtively, quickly searching the room for Artemisia, but seeing only company employees, their spouses, the servants. All the chess pieces had been cleared away.

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**Timons Esaias** is a poet and short-story writer who lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He has appeared in *Interzone* five times before, most recently with "Osmund Considers" (issue 179).

**China Miéville**

*interviewed by*

*Iain Emsley*

# Crunch Fantasy

*Still in his 20s (just), China Miéville is the author of three well-received novels to date: King Rat (1998), Perdido Street Station (2000) – winner of both the British Fantasy Award and the Arthur C. Clarke Award for science fiction – and The Scar (Macmillan, April 2002, £17.99). Iain Emsley spoke to him just prior to the publication of his third book.*

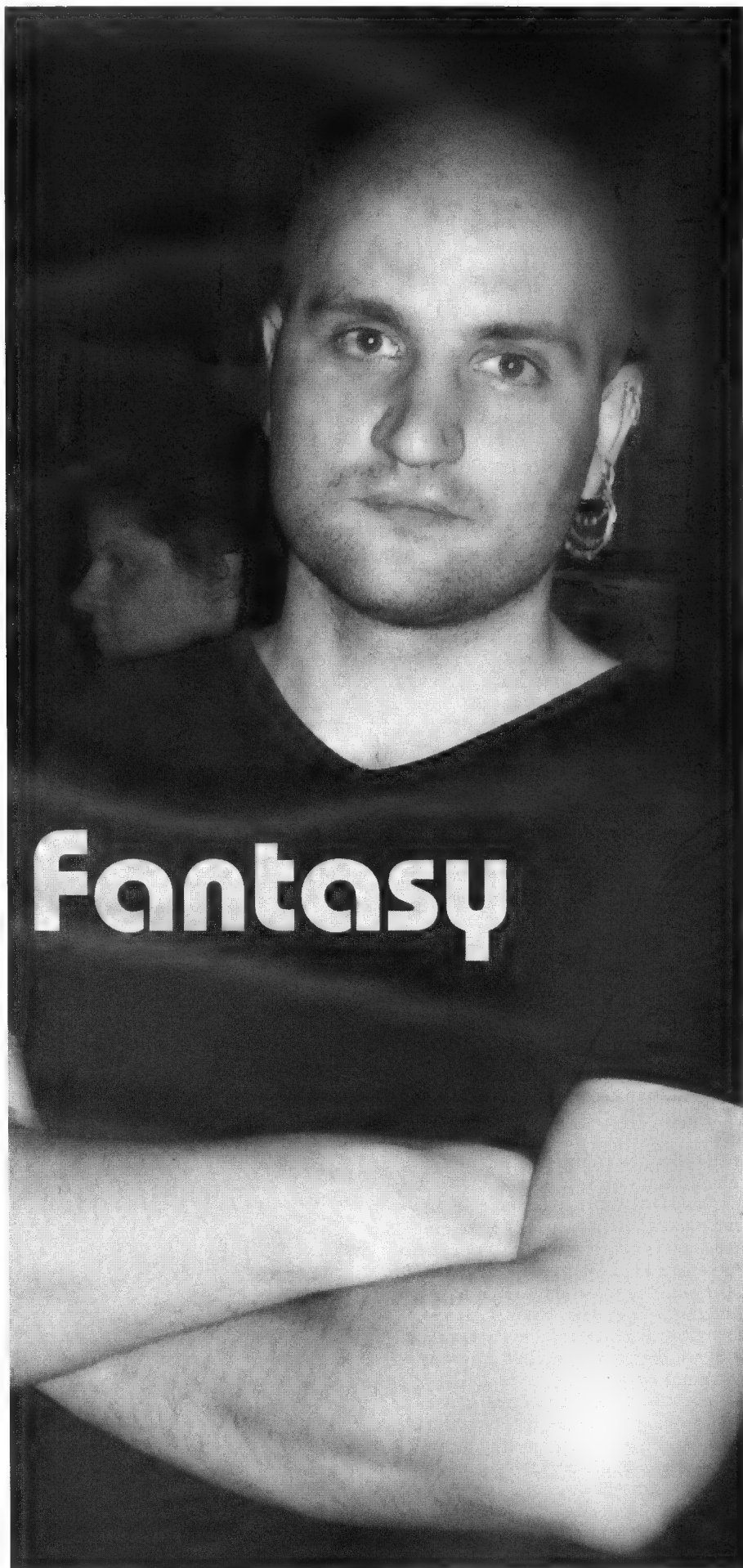


Photo: Paul Brazier

**Emsley:** From *King Rat* onwards, you've taken fantasy tropes and narrative structures and undermined them every time, often showing their weaknesses. However, you also write from a "genre" perspective, don't you?

**Miéville:** You set yourself up for a fall if you say that you're the great, radical voice of fantasy, so I'm not saying that at all, nor do I want to get into a long tedious post-modern nod and wink to certain tropes that we all know. I haven't got time for that. None of this was intended to be ironic. Fuck irony. What it is, it seems to me, is when you write in a tradition, you are so steeped in the tradition, in the tropes of the tradition and in the classic books of the tradition and in the debates, that you may as well know it. Don't kid yourself about it. I am certainly very critical of a lot of traditional fantasy. The reason it bothers me so much is because I love the genre. It's a loving critique if you like. I don't come out of heroic fantasy but I do see that as part of the fantasy tradition which I love. The subversion of tropes in the books is simply because the tropes are there, there's no point in ignoring them so you have to locate yourself within them. It doesn't have to be the aim of the book, you don't have to make a big point about it but you have to know that it is going on. What I'm trying to do is make them autonomously independent. They're all intended to have their own integrity, so you don't need to "get it" to enjoy the story. They're supposed to have their own dynamic but that locate themselves consciously within their traditions, and my location is one that's critical of those tropes. So that's there, but I don't want to see them as a professorial riff on tropes.

**Emsley:** In your work, particularly in *The Scar*, technology and magic cross over, and one becomes the other. Was this from following a certain tradition?

**Miéville:** The tradition of scientific magic, in my books, really comes out of *Dungeons & Dragons* and role-playing games because, even though I'm not a player of role-playing games and haven't played them for many years, I still read them and the source-books and stuff. They exist because people love their fantasy and their weirdness and see themselves in that. The way the games work is to constrain these people within rigid numerical codes and people play them by rolling the dice. So you get this idea of Cthulhu's statistics or that Azerathoth has this kind of strength, this intelligence, this charisma, this dexterity – which is so spectacularly spurious. What intrigues me about it is its completely

missing the point of the fantastic but from a great respect and love for it. The whole point of fantasy is that it is unconstrainable, but they try... and, although it is monstrous, it really appeals to me because of the kind of rigours with which Tolkien and his heirs approach their secondary worlds, almost to a pathological extreme, where they quantify everything. I love that kind of rigour of secondary-world creation, the maps, the distances, treated with great seriousness within its own terms, and for me the magic is that way.

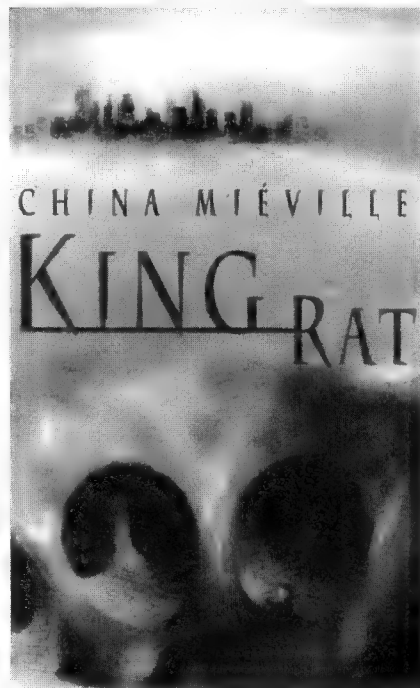
Partly because you can't use a plot device and get out of jail free by waving a wand when it has certain rules, partly because I find it easier to conceive because in certain terms I know what I'm allowed to do with it, and also finally because I like the genres blurring. If you treat science not in opposition to magic, because in my world magic is a branch of science, part of the physics of this world, then you go back into the genre-blurring in the tradition of science fantasy. This is why these scholastic debates about whether *Perdido Street Station* was science fiction or fantasy amuse me. The idea that you can really say at the end of the day whether it is one or the other seems to me to be wrong-headed. So that's really why I approach magic in that way. I do different things, types of impossible things, with it than a hard science-fiction writer does with their technology – but it is still impossible, and justified by its own rules. They don't have the rules of our world but they still have rules.

**Emsley:** It strikes me that your work is very late-19th and early-20th-cen-

tury in style, in contrast to much of the post-Tolkien tradition, which you appear to have a critical attitude towards.

**Miéville:** Tolkien is only one tradition of fantasy. He is influential but he must not define fantasy, and I see it as part of the same genre. I don't see it as counter to it. The interesting thing about post-Tolkien fantasy, "Tolkienesque," is that broadly you can speak about it as an updating of what he did. Then you can talk about writers, like Tad Williams, who write in Tolkien's tradition but are conscious of the problems and issues and while they are not subverting it, nor do they have an uncritical relationship with it at all. Talking about post-Tolkien fantasy doesn't mean you are necessarily talking about a crowd of adulatory apologists. I think that you are quite right in that I try not to write in a post-Tolkien fantasy tradition myself but in an *a-* or *anti-*Tolkien tradition, and in that respect I do locate myself so much further back. What I always say if people ask me what I write, if they know anything about the genre, is that I write "weird fiction" – because I am very much from an early 20th-century, turn-of-the-century, 1920s-and-1930s tradition which is focusing much more on the macabre, the grotesque and the organic. It's very much an amoralist vision, not immoralist, but it is from before the fantastic is structured by moralists. That is more the tradition that I see myself writing in.

Then there's the weird-fiction tradition: Clark Ashton Smith, Arthur Machen, Robert W. Chambers, particularly people like William Hope Hodgson in *The Scar*, and a lot of the maritime stuff. Recently the African writer Dambuzo Marechera, who's not a genre writer, has loomed hugely in my mind over the last three years. Those are the ones that trip off my mind. Without getting into it, there's a host of others, like Lucius Shepard. When you are writing about vampires, it's a bit like the fantasy trope thing, you don't write about vampires unless you know that you are writing under a colossal weight of literary tradition, so you have to situate yourself with regards to that. Shepard's *The Golden* was very much an influence. I find myself loving really quite early sf or fantasy, early weird fiction, and I'm quite interested in the pulp writers. I find the register of pulp, the language that they use, quite fascinating. It is, according to all commercial criteria, bad, but it has its own... not even charm, but *overladenness*. It actually works itself out as being quite democratizing, and the reader is very much part of the process of creating the





work because you force them to squeeze meaning out of the words, and I find that really interesting.

**Emsley:** You involve the reader in creating meaning in your work, rather than giving them a text that is rigid, laying down the path that the reader must follow. You also lay in references that may or may not be picked up by the reader.

**Miéville:** My books are packed full of references because I enjoy it and I find it fun and it gives the world texture. *The Scar* is the most referential book I've ever written. Virtually every maritime book or fantasy that I have ever read is riffed in there, with names and so on. There are some quite fundamental things, a major plot twist is given away early on if you find the reference. The thing about references, obviously, is that they are there to be fun if you get them, but if you don't that's okay.

I think you are right when you say the reader is involved in the creation of meaning. I'm really very pleased that you see it that way because that seems to be a function of moving away from the moralism of the Tolkien-esque fantasy which is a kind of updated version of the fairy-tale structure, the way you have a moral at the end of a folk tale. The interesting thing, parenthetically, is that real folk/fairy tales did not work that way. That's how they came to be perceived to operate in post-Victorian times and once you have a structure of fantasy like that, the moral arc is quite important – and also whether you are in opposition to that. You don't have to agree with the moral arc to enjoy the book, but that's what structures your reading. When you go to a tradition in which the narrative is part of the arc, it's a much more open text and I think more interesting because the reader is completely complicit in the task of decoding in an actual vigorous way. I think that can operate at the level of language as well as structure. One of the reasons why I am so interested in the Zimbabwean writer Dambuzo Marechera, who gives the epigram to *The Scar*, is because I think he does that with language, the way he wrestles with language and you are forced to become part of the process of creating meaning. What I think the weird-fiction writers such as Mervyn Peake and M. John Harrison and the non-moralist fantasists do is they pull the reader into decoding at the level of structure, and that's what I've tried to do. It does make it very difficult to talk about the books in terms of what they are about. They attempt not to work that way.

The other thing that underlies *The*

*Scar* as a whole, and in particular the city of Armada, is the sense of wonder. Although I tend to write quite theoretically about my books, the thing that motivates me to be a writer of weird fiction is that I love weird stuff, I love monsters and aliens and all that, so to that extent I've got to keep a sense of wonder. You can't really say it nowadays without feeling a little stupid. So in Armada, there was great joy in thinking of some of the mechanics, such as the park, and the idea of a ship being turned into a park was such a pleasure. So that's the other level on which I tried to make it work, to take this extraordinary idea, this ridiculous idea, and to take it seriously.

**Emsley:** In the light of the positive reaction to *Perdido Street Station* and the fact that you were still doing your PhD, was *The Scar* a difficult book to write? It is more assured and confident than *Perdido*...

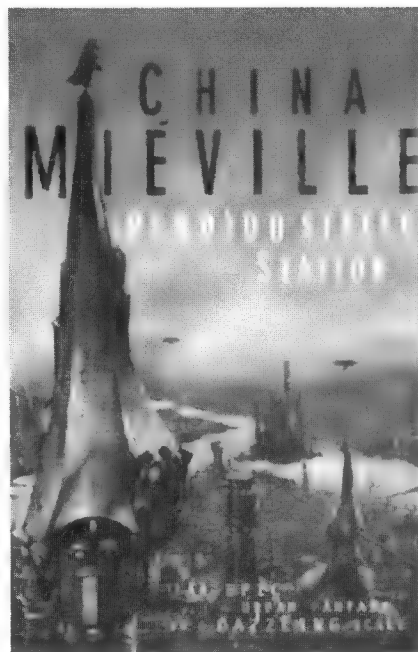
**Miéville:** It was an incredibly hectic and stressful year. I was in the last year of my PhD and I was absolutely buckling under. *Perdido* was quite easy to write in the sense that the whole thing was a kind of descriptive burst. Stuff that I'd had bubbling in my mind for years and years just came out and exploded onto the page with quite a lot of joy. I think *The Scar* is a much more complicated book and I was much more conscious of what I was doing, more carefully crafting. I was trying much harder to do specific things. *Perdido Street Station* is narratively quite bleak. It had a lot of darkness and nasty stuff and it is quite traditional in that it has set-up, crisis, running around trying to solve the crisis, solution, coda – very

straight. In *The Scar*, the structure is one of endless underminings of what it sets up with a sequence of offerings and withdrawals. It sounds monstrously pretentious but it is quite like waves – it brings things on the one hand, but I get to take them back with the undertow. It is on one level a Quest Fantasy and it tries to be anti-Quest in a way. It keeps the reader on their toes. It has been described as "brave," which is a bit of a back-handed compliment for a book. I'm conscious of the fact that it is a less loveable book than *Perdido Street Station*, which is quite an easy book to fall into because the characters are quite warm and it's cossetting, whereas *The Scar* is much more contrary to the reader. That was partly because the response to *Perdido* was really quite overwhelming and lovely but I know it would be a disaster if I tried to do a *Perdido* Part Two.

So quite a lot of things that people really liked about *Perdido Street Station*, I tried to take away and withdraw and do something very different. A lot of the more political stuff is more submerged. There is quite a lot of political stuff going on there but it is much more austere and more interior. I have a sense that some readers, especially readers expecting *Perdido* Two, have a much less warm relationship to the new book. I think it is better because it is more sophisticated, but it won't surprise me if people don't warm to it in the same way. It's not a book you can cuddle up with.

**Emsley:** Cities have featured heavily in your work to date. New Crobuzon was a more organic entity than Armada. Armada would appear to be a city in the vein of Dickens or Ackroyd, full of disparate groups with a social commentary running underneath it.

**Miéville:** People loved the city of New Crobuzon, so *The Scar* is not set in New Crobuzon. Armada is not a city of technology, which means essentially that it is one of mercantilism. Mercantilism is not a self-generating system. It is a system that exists, as Marx said, in the pores of existing society. I love cities and cities are my thing, so although I didn't want to set *The Scar* in New Crobuzon, I did want there to be a city in it. I want Armada to work as a city, and a city with its own dynamic, but it is not the same dynamic as New Crobuzon. So I hope you believe it is an interesting, engaging city-scape which is somehow really quite fundamentally different to New Crobuzon. I think that the shifting alliances and allegiances of Armada are a function of the fact that it has a depth of its own and keeps going in the



same way that a technologically driven, industrial city has a pell-mell subverse which is very difficult to quell. Although there's some diseased politics amongst a lot of people in New Crobuzon and they're all backstabbing each other, it is essentially to take control, to take the driving seat. Whereas with Armada it is much more a question of shaping the city because it only really exists in the intersection with other cities, it's parasitic in that sense. That's why it is not really a utopia but by its very structure it is mythic, this great lost city of ships is also a pathetic city. Everything it has is stolen, even down to the mud, and it's the only way it can exist.

The city in *The Scar* is more of a contingent thing, although it does attempt to have the tectonics of a city, but it's more political in a fractured sense. In a literal sense it is a chance concatenation of groups. That's also partly because of the structure of the narrative. In *The Scar*, this is something that I take very much from Mike Harrison's work: there is a narrative going on and it is quite a strong, coherent narrative, but that's not actually what you are following. So the story is like a line and the people that you are following in the book are oscillating around the line, intersecting with the main narrative at certain main points. So you catch glimpses of the larger narrative, and you catch glimpses of the real story in narrative terms, but that it is not the story you are following, particularly in the case of Bellis because she is so alienated. Although there all these machinations and these groups in the book, Bellis almost defines herself by her alienation and when she does end up working for one of these groups it is by context and not choice. And so the

main character in this book is one who is alienated and alone: Bellis finds herself acting as a conduit for other people's things which is the mode of her own strength and the mode of her own education. It's what allows her to do what she does in the book but it also cripples her in a way. Bellis moves and changes a lot in the book. In some ways, Bellis moves in anti-phase to Tanner Sack. So I do feel a strong sense of movement in the novel but the bulk of the narrative movement happens off-stage. The thrust, or narrative movement, is not what drives the pages. You have a paradoxical movement in which Tanner does finish what New Crobuzon started as a way of dealing with living in a new city, and by the end of the book it has basically gone wrong. The way people end up surviving, living within this particular city, is by not seeing themselves as being part of it but by being much more Machiavellian. Which is back to what you were saying as being the difference between Armada and New Crobuzon as cities. There's not really a lot of fairness to it, it's quite cruel. It's quite contingent, in that if you do the right thing by Armada you might be okay, you might not. Equally, if you do your own thing, you might come out better, you might not. It's not a morality play.

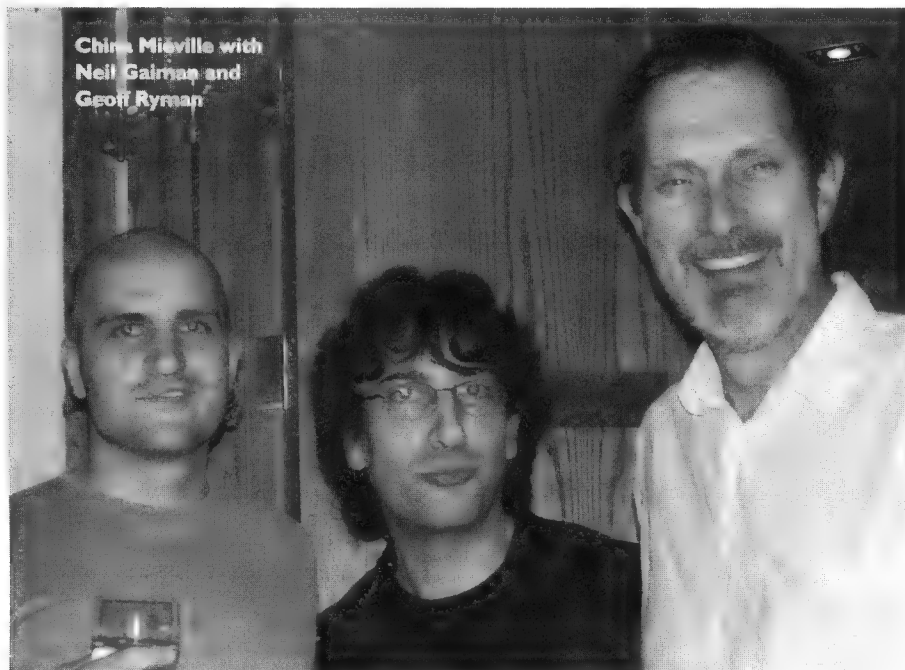
**Emsley:** When Uther Doul is talking to Bellis, he describes the male lover as a peasant fisherman who cuts his lover to claim ownership. She then cuts him back, seemingly taking control of his custom, starting a fierce mutual need. She uses this as a transformation on a certain level.

**Miéville:** In terms of the lovers, the tradition that they are talking about

was the freggios. It is not the same as scarification rituals among certain tribes because it is about individual relationships and not social relationships. It is about a particular relationship that is about love/ownership, and what I like about the female lover is that she does not reject that particular tradition but she takes that tradition at its own word and thereby rejects the point of it in that it is an expression of "love," but the woman is not supposed to do it. She takes it as if it is telling the truth about their own tradition and therefore creates an entirely new tradition, which is why it is so insular and so self-referential.

The lovers' narrative three things: the thing about enquiry into fantasy narrative; the thing about dictatorship, as you are saying – whim vs. social forces; and the other thing is it does the Harrisonian thing of being the main narrative. In many ways the lovers' story is the obvious narrative but nobody really knows anything about them so we intersect them in the book – but that's not the focus. I think that it is genuinely, fundamentally quite rare that you have a dictatorship that is based upon the personal whim of a man or that individual. Even the worst dictators are constrained by particular sets of social dynamics. Even these are constrained by a particular form of very brutal capitalism, and the lover is not particularly cruel or anything like that, and Armada is perfectly happy to deal with that. But her dynamic is not a mercantile dynamic, it doesn't operate for the city; it is self-referential, which is why she is doing what she is doing. One of the things that underlies the book is a meditation on fantasies and quest narrative. She's operating like a traditional fantasy heroine, in many ways, with this great quest for this amazing thing she wants to find. What this is saying vis-à-vis fantasy is, "fine, but don't expect societies to operate that way." She's not a pirate and pirates have a very venal logic, which makes perfect sense. You see the same anti-fantasy thing in the denouement with the Grindylow, where Bellis thinks she knows what is going on, that they are in the quest to recover the magic item which has been stolen, but it's not. It's about a very specific commodity. Losing your powerful religious icon may motivate you to be really pissed off, but to make that kind of effort, it's about the destruction of a society and the destruction of a society is because of social forces. The book is quite conscious of itself vis-à-vis fantasy narrative tropes.

Doul's character in the novel is the ultimate warrior, the knight of the doleful countenance. He's the sad-faced killer, and it almost goes under the weight of his own dynamic which is



why there's other things going on with DouL. He survives as human to be a person by being an *alter ego*. There's a point in the book where you suspect that DouL is a frightened and deeply fucked individual, though we never find out which way DouL is really going. He refuses to ever appear to take charge, defining himself by his own subservience, in part as a soldier who basically obeys orders for pay – a wage labourer – but also as the greatest hero. It's impossible for him to be what he appears to be. You get caught up in the internal debate about whether he is really in charge or whether he is in charge of everything in a desperate attempt not to be in charge of anything. It is about being in a position of power. In some ways it's a book about being reactive. These people are struggling to deal with being who they are in the chopping and changing circumstances which they can't control where they appear to be the ones driving things.

The Broculac is the only one who's really right. He is the only who says this is what we do. The Broculac has very little self-delusion and that's why he is as close as anyone gets to being a goodie. On some levels what he is trying to do is quite a lonely endeavour, saying we are absolutely constrained by what we are and in order to exist we have to do this. So he's about not having any illusions – redemption counts. That operates at a societal level as well as a personal level; you are the sum of your damage, you are a fact of your own existence. The Marechero epigram is very important, and this underlies a lot of the idea of *The Scar*: you don't perceive yourself as a yourself onto which things are being done – you are the things that have been done in the past to you at a fundamental level. The scar is a healing; you are not yourself *with* this blemish, the blemish is you, although that does not for a minute mean that everything happens for the best and we are in the best of all possible worlds. It's about facing the fact that we are when we are, and that's what the Broculac does societally and Bellis ends up doing personally. That's why I hope that you try to deal with the reality. What I just said about Marechero and dealing with the fact of your own reality does not equate to your own status quo. This is not about saying "we are what we are." This is our reality now, but we are faced with a multiplicity of possible reactions. That constrains us, but not totally, and that's where intention comes in. Intention really underlies everything that one does as a socialist. If you don't agree with the intention, you're a cynic, not a socialist, and to that extent the whole thing about possibility that comes up through the book is like the hopeful flip-side to scarification. Scars

are memory, possibility is future.

**Emsley:** Through the novel, Bellis writes a letter which becomes increasingly lengthy. It would appear to open up a gap between intention and action, creating an interstice which you exploit to divert the reader.

**Miéville:** With the letter I knew, or rather I suspected, that people would think that it was being monitored. That's fine because I was including it in the book because the book is intended to read as a stand-alone but if you have read *Perdido Street Station*, obviously you're going to get a riff off it. The thing about it is that it's not to no one, it's not a monologue, it's not a diary, and that's what you said about the interstice. It's Schroedinger's box.

If you look inside it is brimful of potentiality, and the thing about finally deciding and opening the box is that it is simultaneously sad, there is something melancholy about tying down all possibility, but it is also about how we go about living and as soon as you do that you scar reality and then move on again. I really enjoyed all the possibility stuff in the book and it also ties with in with some pseudo-science. I wasn't sure the letter thing would work and I decided to see how it would structure around the novel – but I was really pleased with how it worked. The very last line of the book is bathos. At that point the potentiality of the letter will close, so to that extent it is about the closing down of intention and that happens at the very moment that you make actual contact, which is why it's okay and a bit sad. There are points in Bellis's letter where she starts to treat it as a plaything. There's a point where

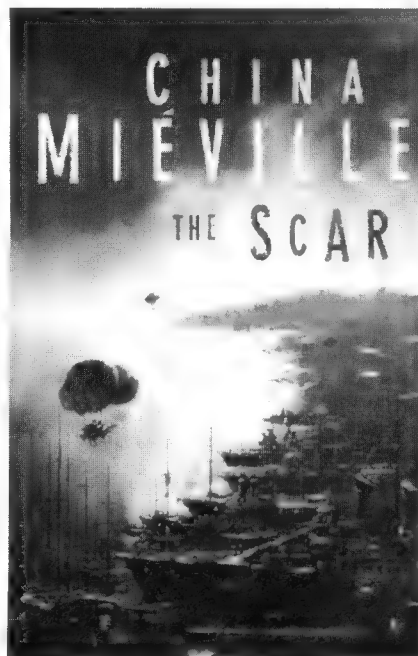
she is describing the fellow passengers and she was hammering it up and what happens is the book says, "and then she wrote about her fellow passengers," but you don't read the letter at that point. You lose the letter's function in the book as a genuine voice of a person talking to someone, just that who it is hasn't been decided yet.

**Emsley:** There is certainly a fuss being made over the publication of *The Scar*. Do you see it as part of a wider wave of readers taking the new wave of British genre writing more seriously and believing in it?

**Miéville:** I'm not really sure what to make of it. I'm delighted, obviously. What's not to like about it? I think it is also a sign that British sf is in a very good state, it is in a very good place at the moment. Sf has not for a long time been in such a good position to break into the mainstream and to gain some credibility as it is now. Speaking as an sf person I'm very pleased because I think that it's a signal of something wider going on. To an extent I am extremely lucky to be writing when I am because I am part of an exciting wave. I think that there is something massively exciting happening in British sf/fantasy at the moment. I enjoyed Steve Cockayne's *Wanderers and Islanders* very much, Justina Robson, Alastair Reynolds... and the list goes on. I think it is also great that this movement, or this wave, includes earlier writers who have become caught up in the crest of this wave, like M. John Harrison, like Paul McAuley, who are seen as part of the same thing. One of the things about "renaissance" is that it's not just about the new stuff but also an appreciation of the older stuff.

I think something is definitely going on, I really do, and the Americans are beginning to notice too. Perhaps not the American readers but those within the industry. I'm going to the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts, in Florida, and there's a panel on British sf so there's an awareness that something is happening. With the older New Wave, it was so associated with a particular journal and so on, but I think with a movement like this, we've still got a few years of it before it gets tired. I hope that it will become more self-conscious and self-referential. As I say, I think I'm genuinely extremely lucky to be writing at this time. I think that it is a fantastic time to be part of the genre in Britain.

I suspect that Michael Moorcock was right – I don't know, I wasn't there – that the New Wave was appreciated *after* it had finished existing, and what a movement needs is a clever and charismatic spokesperson, which he was. Whether or not the new





British sf will get one, we deserve one, I think it's a strong enough movement that it probably will. I do also think that it's probably more disparate than the New Wave tradition, because you have people like Steve Cockayne, who's doing one thing with regard to fantasy, and people like Al Reynolds, who is doing something equally radical but at the other edge of the genre in space opera. They definitely share something but what it is is very difficult to define because it is so different on so many other levels. So it may be a harder job to systematize what's going on now. There is quite a lot of excitement on the web about quite a lot of this stuff.

The interesting thing about British sf is that it intersects with another movement which is proclaimed as the next wave. Something that writers such as Gabe Chouinard and Lou Anders in the States – mostly American writers associated with websites, *Fantastic Metropolis* and *Revolution SF* – have been talking about is a kind of "crunch fantasy," more associated with the fantastic than with sf, talking about my stuff and American writers, such as Jeff VanderMeer, along with a re-appreciation of Harrison and others. The interesting thing is that although these are very distinct, they turn the maps into really interesting

areas. I wonder, again, if in a year or two's time we are going to see the chronicling of this stuff and then I think it will be easier to have a sense of shape of the field than it is now.

We should be having conferences about this stuff, we should be looking for discussions about it, because something's happening and it's worthy of the market and it won't last forever, and we should milk it for all its worth. We should be trying to express its importance. I think we can afford to be quite bolshie about it. If the mainstream had any kind of aesthetic ingenuity or interest or curiosity then they would be milking it. You remember all the hype about the New Puritans a couple of years ago? I know some of the people associated with it, but here you've got another British phenomenon going on and no fucker's talking about it.

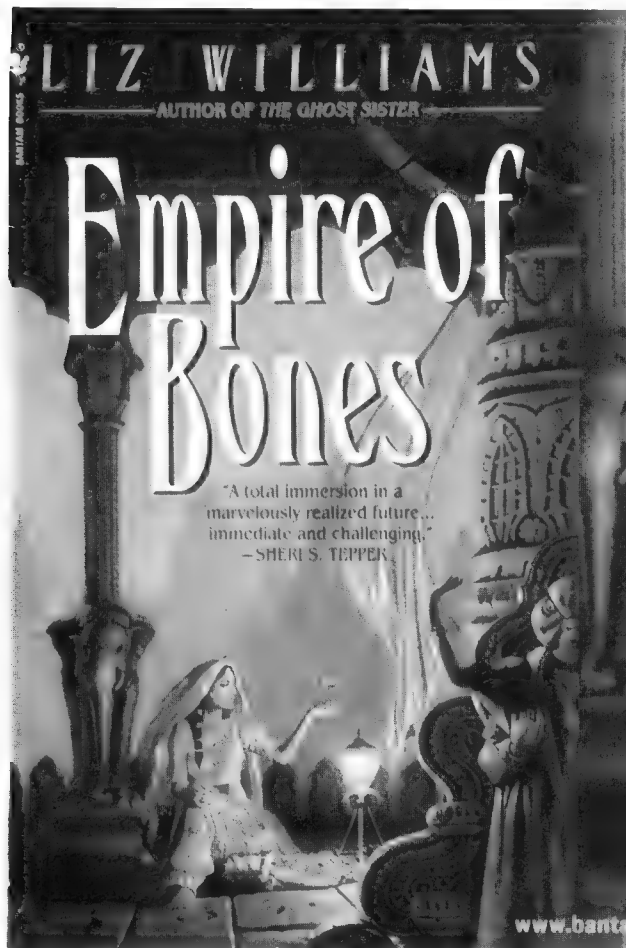
You think about writers like David Mitchell and others who are borrowing from... not just fantasy in Kafkaesque mode, but also genre fantasy. I think that's happening quite a lot at the moment. I don't think one should ever underestimate the resistance to the mainstream talking about sf, but I do think that we are not in a bad place to actually attack it. Again I'm cynical and I think we should grab it whilst it's there. **IZ**

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# Welcome to the Green Planet

Keith Brooke

“I’m on Mars.”

Not an uncommon claim these days, but I choose not to challenge her. We’re standing on a terrace, away from the crowd in Jerry’s dome. Outside, despite the parched heat, the ever-present threat of sand-storms.

Leaning on a stone balustrade, I’d been gazing into Carmel’s big dark eyes, but now I half-turn and follow her look out across the encroaching desert, razor-edged dunes a bloody crimson where light spills from the dome.

A gibbous moon hangs close to the horizon. I follow the ecliptic arc up across the southern sky. A bright spot among the stars: Jupiter. Several moon-spans up and east I find the small green speck of our sister planet Mars.

It hurts, even now.

I turn away, return my gaze to Carmel who still stares at the green planet. We met only minutes before, both seeking refuge from yet another End of the World party.

I realize now that she looks a little like Jacquie: something hard to define in her eyes, the tilt of her head. That must be what has drawn me to her, what makes me want to talk to her and hold her and feel her – gasping, hot, urgent – beneath me.

It’s probably why I don’t quite believe a word she tells me.

“...analyses of the Martian atmosphere by use of infrared telescopes revealed an atmosphere that was dominated by nitrogen and, to a lesser extent, oxygen: a permanent state of disequilibrium which strongly suggested to us that Mars supported life.”

*The Ages of Gaia: An Obituary for Our Dying Earth,*  
James Lovelock

It’s the timing, I suppose. By this stage in the programme I would have spent two years in space: en route to Mars, in orbit on one of the holding stations around the green planet, waiting my turn, glad still that I at least had a turn to await.

Right now, I could have been landing on Mars, something I did so many times in sim all those years ago. Carter City, perhaps: a crater skinned over to retain warmth, so that we can venture out without too many protective layers.

Carter City would be a likely first destination: one of the main centres for the colonization effort, transit point for the human exodus fleeing their dying home planet. I am an experienced agricultural scientist, a specialist in low-temperature cropping techniques – increasingly worthless on our greenhouse-heated home planet but invaluable on Mars, I reasoned during my training. I would likely be moved on from Carter pretty rapidly, out to the agricultural belts around any of the new cities. There we would settle and, working with great fleets of intelligent nurturing and harvesting machinery, I would establish farming systems to feed the growing settlements.

But that first landing! I would have done all in my power to ensure that Jacquie and I were shuttled down to the surface in the same wave of colonists; Jacquie, too, would pull whatever strings she could to keep us together. That was always part of the deal, the pact we had discussed so many times. I think we would have managed it: although the exodus authorities discourage any tendency to over-breed, they recognize the community-building value of established relationships.

Jacquie and I, setting foot on the green planet for the first time. A new start for us, a second chance for our species. *WELCOME TO MARS*, the sign always said in the training sims and, I’m sure, in reality too.

“The abundance of iron-rich minerals in the planetary crust mean that Earth, if not for its tenuous green skin of life, would appear red from space. Earth is a rusty planet.” *Asimov’s Guide to Science*, Isaac Asimov

As soon as I entered the room I knew what he was going to tell me, although it took him five minutes of contradictory analysis to deliver the simple verdict: *no*.

I stared at him. Grey-haired, eyes yellowed like old newspaper, every minute or two he would break away, mid-sentence, to suck greedily at an air-mask. Degenerative lung disease: he clearly would not be a part of the exodus.

“You tell me that my scores for mental and psychological aptitude are in the top two percentiles,” I say. “That my education, training and work experience offer an array of skills highly valued by the Commission.” I

knew as much already, had done so for some considerable time: I would have been ejected from the selection process two months previously if I had not scored highly on the initial tests.

"You tell me that my performance in each of the 16 sims was highly creditable, that there's very little that I could have done better. And then you conclude that my application for Mars transit status has been refused..."

The commissioner gasped oxygen from his white plastic mask. "You have a dysfunctional heart," he said simply, finally.

Into the silence, he continued: "Arrhythmia: an irregularity in the beating of your heart. You may be lucky and live to a ripe old age – let one of the other illnesses of our times take you... But subjected to the rigours of spaceflight, of adapting to an alien environment, your condition makes you more of a risk. Too great a risk for the Commission to invest in your transit."

He broke away, sucked air from his mask.

"What can I do?" I asked him. I didn't want to plead, knew it would achieve nothing, but for once my ability to handle crisis – which had served me so well during the selection sims – had deserted me. "How can I get this decision reversed?"

Was it Mars or Jacquie I feared losing? I did not know, could not think.

"There is an alternative," said the commissioner. "An option we recommend strongly."

"Tell me."

He nodded. "I..." Another gasp of air. "I am going to Mars," he told me.

I stared at him, aghast, as he took several more long sucks of air.

Clearly, he had anticipated my reaction, was playing it up, toying with me. "You wonder how," he said finally. "In my condition... My statement was incorrect: let me re-word it. What I meant to say was that I am already on Mars. Like you, I met the criteria for transit: my skill-set, my profile, my performance in the simulations. But clearly my physical condition precludes inclusion in the programme – my travelling to the green planet was never an option."

Another pause for air, then: "There are many roles in the programme for which a physical presence is not required. The profiling process is thorough, allowing us to reconstruct complete personae *in virtuo* – personae which can be embedded into the hardware of the colonization effort. What better guiding intelligence for space stations, exploratory vehicles, mining and agricultural drones, than fully-trained – and experienced – human personae...?"

"Consider the mathematics of exodus, my friend. Despite all the resource wars, the plagues and other calamities of our times, our species still numbers in the billions on this failing planet. How many shuttles do we have? How many body-carriers ferrying ceaselessly between Earth and Mars? How many emigrants do you think we can physically transport? We have 25,000 on the green planet at present. Best projections tell us we may be able to transport another 50,000 before the opportunity is closed through one disaster or another."

More air. "Sign yourself up to the virtual option, my friend, and you are free of the physical bottleneck of the exodus. We have mapped your personality during the sims: we know you are a suitable candidate. We would hate to lose your skill-set."

I sat in silence, struggling to catch up.

"Consider it," said the commissioner. "It is your opportunity to remain a part of the human story."

Jacquie. As tall as me, with the frame of a natural athlete. Dark hair, cut to different lengths, gave her a wild look, a rebellious look. Loving Jacquie was like chasing dreams at first dawn: elusive, exhilarating, always desperate not to let go.

"Love you for always," she would murmur into my ear in the sweaty aftermath of passion. And sometimes: "I'd follow you to the ends of the earth, my love."

"To Mars?" I asked her one day. My whole life mapped a route in that direction, the course of the exodus. She must have known, yet my question appeared to take her by surprise.

Later: "It scares me," she said.

"Staying here scares me more," I told her. Here in northern Europe we were lucky to be in a fairly stable region, but it could not be long before chaos descended, plague and war and shortages destroying all.

"No: not that."

"What then?"

"The selection," she told me, tears brimming her big, dark eyes. "You have the skills, the training: they could never turn you down."

I saw where she was leading. "You are intelligent," I told her. "You have medical experience. They would be fools not to offer you a place."

"I dropped out of med school," she reminded me. "Couldn't see the point: it's all going to end, isn't it?"

I stroked tears from her cheeks, kissed saltiness away. "A promise," I told her. "A pact: we go together or not at all. I could never leave you."

I spoke the truth: I had not even considered the possibility of leaving her behind. I would abandon all for my love, Jacquie.

"Most important, the landers were equipped with arrays of ecological sensors... Observations showed that, while life is certainly abundant on our sister planet, it is primitive in nature, much of it unicellular."

*Asimov's Guide to Science*, Isaac Asimov

The pain lessens with the passage of time, the years erasing the memories one by one.

But one holds strong: Jacquie's face, an expression I didn't really understand. In fact I'm not sure that I understand it even now, the complex alloy of emotions that made her look the way she did when the Commissioner told her she could go to Mars.

Triumph, of course: "I've been offered a place in transit," she told me.

Relief, I suppose, after months of work and suspense. Guilt, too, I hope. She knew already: "They've turned



me down," I told her. "I failed the physical."

"No they didn't," she said. "I spoke to Commissioner Andresson. You can go *in virtuo*. They want you, my love. They want us both!"

"You're going to go, despite our agreement." God, I felt low, saying it like that, low that I even *had* to say it.

"How can I *not* go? And anyway, we can both still go, only you won't be there in body."

I turned away from her then, unable to meet a look I could not understand. Her hands enclosed my face, turned my head, and it was Jacquie's turn to stroke tears from my cheeks, to kiss the salt away. "We *can* go," she murmured, excited, hungry. "We can go together, my love."

I could have been on Mars by now, or at least a part of me could, a copy of me could.

Many of those sent *in virtuo* would find themselves stored indefinitely in the vast orbiting memory cores, waiting until their specific skill-sets were required. I, however, had been guaranteed a place on the surface from the outset: they needed people like me, they assured me.

Or, at least, they needed *copies* of people like me.

Beamed to a receiver in Mars orbit in a sequence of data-dense radio pulses, I would have been reassembled in the memory core, reconstructed and forwarded to the surface. There, I would have been channelled into the neural net of an agricultural system: something mobile, I would have asked for, although I do not know if they would have listened. I would hate to be the controlling intelligence for one of the vast grow-domes scattered through the agricultural belts. One of the nurturing agricultural drones working to adapt terrestrial agricultural techniques to the low-temperature, low-nutrient regime of the Martian wilderness would be ideal: a challenging role, not a holding one.

But how much of me would I lose, in undergoing such a process? How much of me would they strip away in preparing me for transmission, in adapting me for my new role?

On Mars I would have a body far more durable than one of flesh and blood. I would see, hear, smell, feel and taste. I would retain the power of reason, of imagination, of wonder.

But would I dream, I wonder? Beneath my Martian sky, the stars still familiar, not alien at all. Would I dream?

"No," I told the commissioner. "I can't do it. I won't let you send a diminished copy of myself to Mars, that wasn't what I signed up for."

Getting so close was one of the most painful things. There but for the inconstant organ in my chest.

He sucked at air, then: "I hope you will reconsider," he said. "You would be a highly valued member of the programme."

I shook my head, rose slowly from my seat in the Transit Commission's office.

Nothing he could say would persuade me. I simply could not bear to be there, on the surface of Mars and yet incomplete. I could not stand to be there and still to care.

And worse: I could not bear to be there and to no

longer care.

I don't blame Jacquie for going, I suppose. For breaking our lovers' pact. Could I really have denied her such an opportunity?

I remain on Earth. And I care, even now, after five years.

"The opportunities to harness the primitive biosphere of Mars may not be great, but they do present a viable alternative to what remains of Earth's biosphere, ravaged by high-speed industrial revolution made too easy by our planet's rich metal resources."

*Mars Fact Pack*, UNSA Educational

The party rages behind us, secure in Jerry's luxury dome. How long will the dome survive, I wonder? The time for opulence has passed. The time for most things has passed.

Another End of the World party, as if it doesn't matter.

Carmel takes my hand, leads me down the stone steps. Bare feet, scoured by coarse sand.

At times it's still hard to believe that this is really the end, but here in our pocket of semi-civilization we are easily deluded. Working in the Ministry, I see the reports, the projections. I know all about the resource wars, the warming, the increasing desertification: all because we were cursed with such a resource-rich planet. The metals that make the sand and rocks red, the rich abundance of fossil fuels, all made it so easy.

I pull Carmel towards me, claw at her clothing. All that is left is to live for the day. Something our kind knows well.

The temperature is minus 24, the alignment of this valley serving to trap the sun's rays: a suitable site for another experimental plot.

I take a scoop of soil into Pod A, taste it, heat it and sniff the emerging gases. Analysis confirms my initial hunch: the soil is rich – we will test here, assessing novel varieties adapted for the cold growing conditions.

I work hard tilling the lichen-encrusted soil.

Later, I pause.

It is dark.

I look at the stars, so familiar. "I am on Mars," I tell myself, again. Then I look up, across the ecliptic, find the small blue speck that is Earth.

I wonder why I would have given permission for them to bring a copy of myself to Mars like this: I cannot recall the details, but somehow I do not think I would have wished it. They would have done it anyway, I know: they would not allow personal whim to get in the way of what is best for the exodus.

I remember Jacquie, now. Picture her face.

I remember loving Jacquie.

She is on Mars in person, I know. I wonder if it would be possible for me to trace her, to contact her.

I wonder if I even want to.

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**Keith Brooke** lives in Brightlingsea, Essex, and last appeared in *Interzone* with the story "Liberty Spin" (issue 158). Recently, he also co-edited, with Nick Gevers, a special guest-issue of the magazine (issue 177, March 2002). We're pleased to welcome him back as a writer rather than an editor.

An awesome revelation from Kathryn Cramer at the US convention Boskone: "When she was in college, Joanna Russ wrote a play of *The Hobbit*... We have this manuscript somewhere in our basement. With stuff in the margin, in Tolkien's very recognizable handwriting, that says, 'No, no, no, hobbits do NOT wear hats with red pompoms on them!'"

## THEORIES OF EVERYTHING

**Mike Ashley** was announced as this year's winner of the SFRA Pilgrim Award for distinguished sf criticism, to be presented in June. "It seems odd to get a lifetime award when I still feel I've only just started!"

**Fred Clarke**, Arthur C. Clarke's younger brother, had a heart attack at Easter but was soon out of hospital and should make a full recovery. He was 81 in April.

**Ian McEwan** conveys that finding inspiration is far tougher for Real Writers like himself than for, say, Kim Stanley Robinson. "... Where does it come from? You have to dig fairly deeply and relax your control of it, unless you're a genre writer and can say, 'I'm going to write about the colonization of Mars.'" (*New York Times*, 23 April)

**Michael Moorcock** pondered my helpful idea of fell, rune-carved, prosthetic toes to replace his two lost extremities: "I'm not sure even I can get a good name for magical, self-willed pinkies – Antfrightener? Snakeupsetter? Frogscarer?"

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Andromeda Bookshop** in Birmingham, forced by lack of funds to close its doors in late January (though it kept trading on a speakeasy basis), was rescued by a friendly takeover on 18 April and re-opened next day with its founder Rog Peyton re-hired as manager.

**Hugo Nominations.** Let's just list the most popular categories. Best Novel: *The Curse of Chalion*, Lois McMaster Bujold; *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman; *Perdido Street Station*, China Miéville; *Cosmonaut Keep*, Ken MacLeod; *Passage*, Connie Willis; *The Chronoliths*, Robert Charles Wilson. • Dramatic Presentation: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's [sic] Stone*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Monsters, Inc.*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – "Once More, With Feeling," *Shrek*. Other British contenders include Charles Stross (novelette), Stephen Baxter (short story), Tom Shippey (best related book) and *Interzone* (semi-prozine).

**R.I.P.** A particularly gloomy list this issue. **Richard Cowper** (1926-2002), author of the Corlay trilogy and other



lyrical, very English sf, died on 29 April. In real life he was John Middleton Murry Jr, son of the noted critic, and published fine autobiographies as Colin Middleton Murry. A witty, charming man, now much missed, he was the subject of newspaper obituaries by Christopher Priest in *The Independent* and John Clute in *The Guardian*. • **Joan Harrison**, wife for 48 years of sf author Harry Harrison, died from cancer on 21 April. All sympathy to Harry and family. • **Damon Knight** (1922-2002), one of the great shapers of 20th-century sf, died on 14 April. He was 79. Any list of Knight's achievements stretches on and on: artist, our genre's first critic of real stature (see his 1956 *In Search of Wonder*), winner of a 1956 Hugo as best book reviewer and a 1975 SFRA Pilgrim award for distinguished criticism, author of many unforgettable stories, influential editor (especially of *Orbit*, 1966-80), founder of SFWA, underrated sf novelist, biographer of Charles Fort, sf/fan historian in *The Futurians*, SFWA Grand Master laureate (1995), popular convention guest, husband of that other fine writer Kate Wilhelm (who survives him), and all-round good guy. Our loss is great. • **George Alec Effinger** (1947-2002), talented US author who attracted much attention with his first novel *What Entropy Means to Me* (1972), and won both Hugo and Nebula awards with "Schrödinger's Kitten" (1988), died on 27 April aged 55. His life had been plagued with health problems and vast medical bills. • **John R. Pierce** (1910-2002), US engineer and writer who published sf as John Roberts and J. J. Coupling as well as his own name, died on 2 April aged 92. As executive director of Bell Labs (1952-71) he was a key figure in the Telstar project, and always credited the inspiration of Arthur C. Clarke's 1945 *Wireless World* article

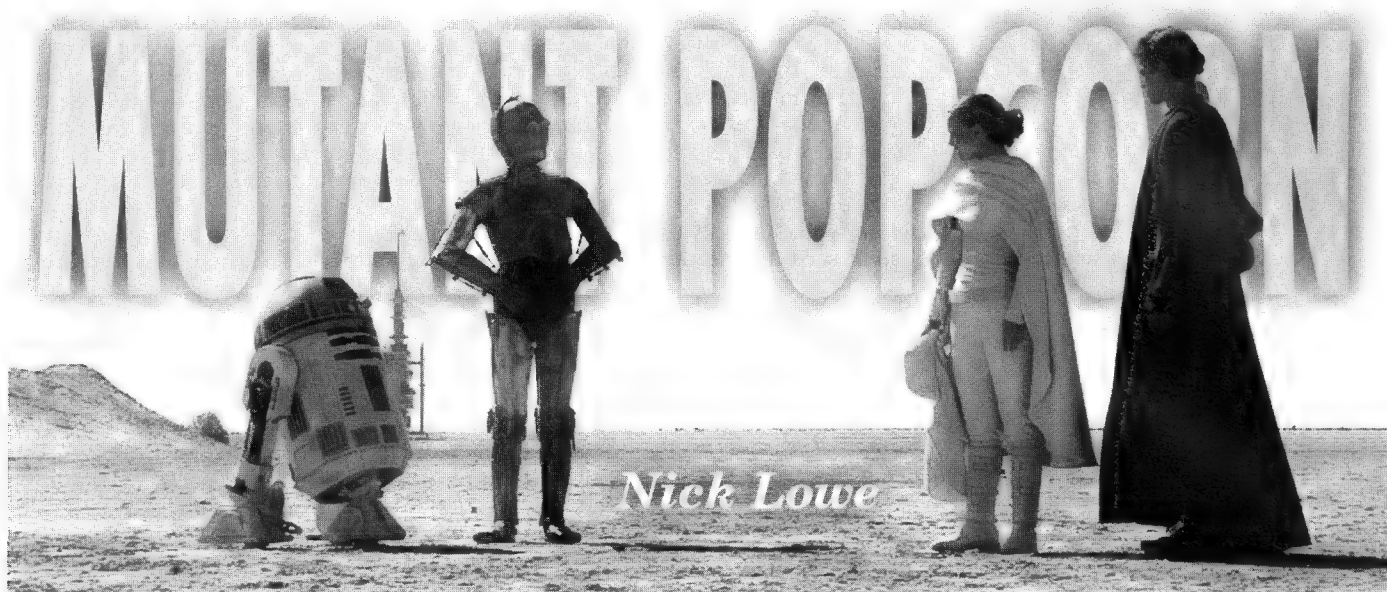
on communications satellites. • "*Mary Scott*, author of 'literary' fiction that invariably strayed into the science fictional and fantastic, died of cancer on 23 April, at the age of 54 [*writes Molly Brown*]. Though in constant pain towards the end, she never lost her sense of humour, and those of us who knew her will never forget her zest for life and generosity of spirit."

**Amazon Mystery.** Authors of fantasies on sale at Amazon.com noticed a rash of oddly similar customer reviews that rubbished their work and instead recommended, say, George R. R. Martin, Robert Jordan, and Robert Stanek. The number of Big Name commendations varied, but not the plug for self-published author Robert Stanek. Who could possibly be posting these reviews (many since removed by Amazon) under a variety of names? It is a mystery, but *Ansible* is reminded of how Lionel Fanthorpe's pseudonymous sf would often mention those great classic masters of the genre, Verne, Wells and Fanthorpe.

**More Awards.** *James Tiptree Award: The Kappa Child*, Hiromi Goto. • *Nebulas*, 27 April: Novel *The Quantum Rose*, Catherine Asaro; Novella "The Ultimate Earth," Jack Williamson; Novelette "Louise's Ghost," Kelly Link; Short "The Cure for Everything," Saverna Park; Script *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. • *International Horror Guild* awards for 2001 work included: Novel *Threshold*, Caitlín R. Kiernan; First Novel *Ordinary Horror*, David Searcy; Collection *Through Shattered Glass*, David B. Silva; Anthology *Night Visions 10* ed. Richard Chizmar.

**As Others See Us.** Not everyone, it seems, can distinguish between sf and Scientology. "Sandra Bernhard on Tom Cruise and Penelope Cruz: 'Leave the Spanish girl alone! Let her go home! Let the chick go! Don't fuck her mind with your mind-bending, scientific, science-fiction shit!'" (*Evening Standard* free magazine *Hot Tickets*, 23-28 March)

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Highbrow Dept.* "Nordon dug out the ship's plans and located the approximate position from Jimmy's report. Then he whistled softly and his eyebrows climbed towards the ceiling." (Arthur C. Clarke, *The Sands of Mars*, 1951) • *One-Eyed Trouser Snake Dept.* "Poring over the curves of her breasts and hips, Patrick's erection pulsed wildly." (Thomas Staab, *Heart of Ice, Blood of Fire*, 2000) • "He was not as old in appearance as his age might have made him appear." (Gordon R. Dickson, *Soldier, Ask Not*, 1967)



I'm cutting and pasting here, and some of the lines come from scenes eliminated in the final version, but the thrust is clear enough. *Count Dooku*: "The democratic process in the Republic is a sham, a shell game played on the voters. It will not be long before the cult of greed called the Republic will lose even the pretext of democracy and freedom." *Amidala*: "We must keep our faith in the Republic. The day we stop believing democracy can work is the day we lose it." *Obi-Wan*: "It's been my experience that Senators are only focused on pleasing those who fund their campaigns; and they are more than willing to forget the niceties of democracy to get those funds." *Amidala*: "What is happening here is not government that has been bought out by business; it's business becoming government." *Mace Windu*: "There aren't enough Jedi to protect the Republic. We are keepers of the peace, not soldiers." *Amidala*: "If you offer the separatists violence, they can only show us violence in return."

Let's summarize. We have a notionally democratic Republic whose governing Senate is heavily in the pockets of big business, and whose elected leader is secretly in league with the Dark Side, deliberately fuelling a bilateral arms race with the aim of escalating local tensions into a galaxy-wide war. The real purpose of that war is to centralize power in the Chancellor himself, under the pretext of emergency security measures against an outside threat. But this will lead, with an inevitability foreseen a quarter-century ago, to a fascist dictatorship and the eventual abolition (early in *A New Hope*) of the institutions of democracy itself. Liberal apologists argue that the system, flawed as it is, is still worth defending,

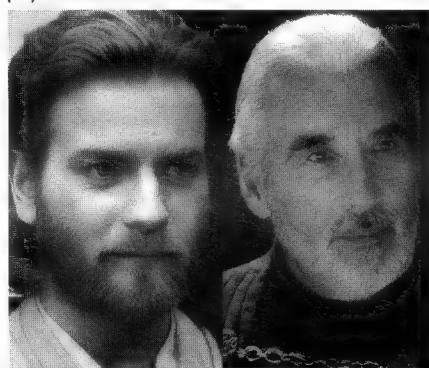
and that diplomacy is always better than armed confrontation. But they have no clear answer to the voices who argue that capital will always be the enemy of freedom, both within its institutions and without. Indeed, the most tangible challenge to the Republic comes from the faceless multiplanetaries, a shadowy alliance of the forces of galactic capitalism with names like the Trade Federation, the Commerce Guilds, and the Corporate Alliance, who can arm faster because they're not encumbered by the painful need for consultation, consensus, and democratic process, which in any case they're busily subverting from within.

This is all pretty strong stuff for a *Star Wars* film, even without the additional resonance it picks up from its year of release. It would have been easy enough to present a simplified version in which George Bush is a Dark Lord of the Sith and leave it at that. But the unexpected thing about *Clones* is its startlingly overt attempt to reinterpret American history and

politics in terms of the philosophy of the Force. As anyone who put "Jedi Knight" on their census form knows by now, *all* recourse to arms in anger is surrender to the dark side. When Anakin lightsabres the Tusken back to the stone age in blanket revenge for an atrocity against his own, it's the first fateful step in his ultimate Darthification. That's presumably why the plot engine of *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* is the striking fact that the thousand-year-old Republic has no standing army, so that when the forces of evil raise a droid horde against them there's nothing to meet them with. What luck that someone on the team has seen the problem coming and commissioned a defence programme on the sly, so that the Republic has a handy clone army ready to pit against the Federation's forces. Ah, but: the most powerful plot whammy in *Clones* is the discovery that the Republic's military salvation is none other than the imperial stormtroopers (now fascinatingly revealed, along with the Fetts, as Maoris, in yet another sign of the New Zealand takeover of the entire universe). As the Sarumanic Count points out to Obi-Wan, the Jedi are unwittingly fighting on the side of the Sith; for Amidala as for Yoda, the only right side in a war is the one that prevents it from ever happening.

These are, it's fair to say, quite big themes, and if their actual execution is fairly incoherent, that too in its way is part of the point. In the midst of a disintegrating galactic order and the rise of incomprehensible evil from its secret places, the outlook of an Anakin Skywalker, or a George Lucas, is easy to feel. "Life seems so much simpler when you're fixing things," our hero grunts. "I like fixing things." Dealing with people, expressing feelings, find-

*Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*  
Above: R2D2, C3PO, Natalie Portman as Padmé Amidala and Hayden Christensen as Anakin Skywalker. Below left: Obi-Wan-Kenobi is played by Ewan McGregor; and, right, Christopher Lee plays Count Dooku





ing the right words, seeing a plausible path by which good people might choose evil: these aren't things that come easily to an overgrown teen who's only really happy driving cars and playing with technology. He knows that something's wrong with the body politic, but stumbles to articulate problems and solutions; and as the love of his life points out, "Sometimes there are things no one can fix." With the benefit of three episodes' hindsight, we know more and worse: that intrafamilial bonds, what the Jedi call a "possessive relationship," are a slippery slope that leads only down into darkness. It's a startlingly bleak view, in some ways plunging us right back to the world of *THX 1138*, and a long, hard way from any kind of new hope.

It has to be conceded nevertheless that *Episode II* is stronger the farther it gets from its two leads, who fulfil most of the worst fears about Lucas' capacity to rise to epic emotion. Some of this is simply down to drastic cutting; thanks to the early draft of the script which slipped out ahead of the release and rapidly propagated all over the web, we know that the relationship scenes we see in the final cut are just fragments of longer and more coherent scenes as originally written, which is one reason why it all seems so disjointed in the finished version. Amidala in particular has had her screentime brutally cut, with the deletion of a lengthy establishing sequence on Naboo with her family, and most of her political autobiography cut from the dialogue. But it's doubtful whether these characters could ever have been made to convince. The intimate scenes include some of the most astonishing speeches George Lucas, that undefeated master of the unspeakable line, has ever written with or without assistance ("My

heart is beating, hoping the kiss will not become a scar"); and poor Hayden Christensen, who works terribly hard at trying to get his character to breathe emotion and may yet be quite good at the *Episode III* stuff, is as miscast for present purposes as Jake Lloyd was in *Episode I*.

Saddest of all is to see Natalie Portman so abominably used – one of the great screen performers of her generation, who lit up *Episode I* and seemed able to survive the most clonking Lucasian dialogue and direction, but who here has additionally to struggle against butchered scenes, some wildly inappropriate wardrobe, and lighting makeup so unflattering you wonder if someone had a bet on. At the other extreme, though, and tellingly, Ewan McGregor looks more than ever like a genius stroke of casting, turning in what is already the all-time benchmark demonstration of how to act in a *Star Wars* film: working with rather than against the naughtiness, projecting his disdain for bluescreen work, unsayable lines, and wooden motivation as a kind of quizzical but imperturbable Jedi cool. Indeed, one of the great things about being a Jedi is that the ban on possessive relationships means none of the cheesy familial or romantic emoting on which movie acting is normally founded. And when you compare Obi-Wan's performance to Anakin's, you can see exactly why orphan Annie is just never going to make the grade. Real Jedi don't twitch. They can, but they choose not to. Be mindful of that, my young apprentice, as you take on the supreme challenge of the true Jedi actor: to address someone convincingly as "my young apprentice."

On the whole, the glories of this remarkable *Episode* amply outweigh the embarrassments. Apart from all else, and even more than *Phantom Menace*, it's an extraordinarily beauti-

ful film to watch, stuffed with establishing planetscape shots that really feel like classic cover art come to life. In a huge leap of visual and narrative ambition, the action of *Clones* spans no fewer than five contrasting worlds – introducing Kamina and Geonosis as well as old friends Tatooine, Coruscant, and Naboo – when no other *Episode* to date has attempted more than three. This in itself makes for a far richer diversity of planetary landscape than any of the earlier films has attempted, even without the significantly longer and more lavish Naboo exteriors (including some exquisite shots of a digitally-enhanced Lake Como) and Coruscant city views. It's all a spectacular demonstration of how far the digital arts have moved on even in the three years since *Menace*, a visual jawdropper in its day.

But more than that, it's also the closest anyone's yet come in sf cinema to a truly galaxy-spanning adventure, its intertwined plotlines each leaping with novelistic ease from lushly-imagined world to world. The whole plot is impressively dense and impenetrable, in a way quite unlike the *Episodes* seen so far, and for the first time in a quarter-century of the series there's a real sense of authentic sf-epic complexity and intrigue – so much so that it takes fairly determined re-reading to feel you've fathomed who's behind what and why. And yet it's all managed with a remarkably light touch, with some of the key connections so obliquely made that most viewers will probably miss them altogether. (Test your *Clones* fanboy quotient: Who is really behind the assassination attempt on Amidala, and why? Why is Palpatine so anxious to get Amidala off Coruscant? What is Dooku's motive for telling Obi-Wan, truthfully, that the Republic is under the control of Darth Sidious? If you answered all three questions, correctly or not, it's

**The Scorpion King**

Below and left:

"The Rock" plays Mathys

Below: Kelly Hu plays

Cassandra. Right: Bernard

Hill as Philos, Grant Heslov

as Arpid and Sherri Howard

as Queen Isis



time to examine the whites of your eyes closely in the mirror.)

From the draft, it's plain that some of the more ambitious interstellar-epic intricacies eluded even Lucas himself. (Who, if anyone, was Syfa-Dyas? It's all too clear that George never made up his mind.) But comparison with the finished version also reveals a deft address to the things that *Clones* still needed to do to pass muster as a *Star Wars* film. It's fascinating to see that the involvement of Artoo and Threepio in the showdown was a late addition, together with the whole droid-factory set piece that hooks them in. (In the draft they just twiddled thumbs in the ship and listened to the shouting in the distance.) Indeed, the whole head-swap routine is a masterly solution to the Threepio problem, required as he is to wander with Artoo in and out of the fall of the Republic like an interplanetary Rosencrantz and Guildenstern without apparently recollecting anything of this in *Episode IV*.

(Artoo's less of a concern, since all he gets to do is beep laconically for others to interpret. – "What's that, Artoo? You want to play your xylophone?") And even Jar-Jar has benefited from a surge of sense to the brain. In the draft, everybody's least favourite African-Amphibian gibbering buffoon had taken elocution lessons as part of his diplomatic training, his impeccably-mastered white man's speech dropping back into Gungan jive at only moments of off-guard excitability. Happily, somewhere along the line a penny dropped about how this was likely to play with the offended lobby. Why, he's growing up into quite the politician, is our George.

A lot of the credit for *Episode II*'s fitness must go to co-writer Jonathan Hales, who did such fine work on the *Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*, and had a large hand in yet another likeable franchise prequel, *The Scorpion King*. Notionally a spin-off from co-author Stephen Sommers' *Mummy* cycle, Chuck Russell's film is actually a workout in a quite different film genre: a *Conan* film for the millennium, updating the cheap and cheerful Italian muscleman epics of the 1950s and '60s in the language of postmodern stunt cinema. Proudly proclaiming its credentials as essentially a wrestling picture ("In Association With WWF Entertainment") on a strictly backlot budget ("Filmed Entirely in California"), it's the standard genre scenario, pitting an engaging wrestler-turned-actor against a sadistic Old Testament tyrant with an almond-eyed virgin caught in the middle. No sword-and-sandal cliché has been spared, from the dance of the midriffed handmaidens to the no less obligatory "Halt!

what is in the cart?" scene. One major challenge of prehistoricals for the posthistorical audience is the difficulty of setting up the requisite quota of fireworks; but the problem's deftly solved here by the inclusion of Bernard Hill as a former-day Archimedes specializing in stunt inventions millennia before their time, culminating in the invention of gunpowder and a finale that delivers what is quite literally the mother of all explosions. It's all the perfect backdrop for a climax that requires our hero to take Gomorrah with a liberation army apparently comprised entirely of scantily-clad Afro-Amazonian warrior babes.

Real history, needless to say, isn't in it. The title, which takes a couple of extremely contrived plot detours to justify, seems more of a nod to Hong Kong cult cinema than to the semi-legendary unifier of Egypt who has been argued to be represented in the world's oldest known storyboard, the Gebel Tjauti tableau from around 3250 BC. As the prologue horde captain announces in a gloriously nonsensical sweep of pan-historical and pan-geographical syncretism, "We have killed Mesopotamians, Babylonians, Sumerians, Cimmerians, but we have never had the pleasure of killing an Akkadian." One hazard to this kind of project today is that the same cheerfully omnivorous approach to antiquity has already been heavily mined in the tv *Xenaverse* ("Anything BC is OK," Rob Tapert once remarked), and it was quite a brave commitment to gamble that there was even room for the same kind of cocktail on the big screen five years too late. But it's snappily written, with an amiable lead and plenty of amusing set pieces, and series potential programmed in from the start.

In the long term, though, that will probably be its undoing. With a visible eye on Howard's original *Conan* cycle, *The Scorpion King* sells itself as a franchise with a long and capacious arc, a series intended to run and run and run; and yet in this case, as with the story of Anakin Skywalker, the end of the saga is already in the can. We already know from the prologue of *The Mummy Returns* that Mathayus is ultimately destined to turn to the dark side, forging an autocratic empire before being overthrown and returning as a hastily-finished dodgy CG villain. Quite how or whether this descent into darkness will ever be mapped on film is pretty hard to foresee, even with the assistance of a scorpion queen blessed with the power to see future episodes. It's fun for now; but clouded, the future is.

Nick Lowe

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# The Hugo Nominee

*Terry Bisson*

## Characters

*Billy*            *An 11-year-old boy*  
*Bobbi*           *His twin sister*  
*Dad*            *Their father*  
*Messenger*    *(A few lines)*  
*Gideon*        *Seminole air-boat captain*  
*Sam*            *Backwoods alligator trapper*  
*Ranger*        *Gung-ho female conservationist, 35*  
*Lola*           *Rich Cuban widow, 75*  
*Taco*           *Her chihuahua*  
*Monte*         *Wheelchair-bound SF writer, 35*

## SCENE 1

/MUS/    THEME UP, GRADUALLY MODULATES TO  
/SFX/    DISTANT HOWLING OF WOLVES, FADES  
          TO

/SFX/    ENGINE IDLING

/SFX/    FOOTSTEPS ON WOODEN DOCK

Billy:    Look, Dad! At the end of the dock. A boat with  
          a big propeller, like an airplane. Cool!

Bobbi:    (reading) It says "See the Everglades by Air  
          Boat \$5." Can we take a ride? Please! Please!

Dad:     I don't know, kids. I'm not sure it's appropriate  
          for 11-year-olds.

Billy:    Oh, please! Bobbi and I will be SUPER good, we  
          promise!

Bobbi:    Oh, please, Dad! Billy's right. We promise.  
          Please!

/SFX/    MORE FOOTSTEPS ON WOODEN DOCK

Ranger:   Sir?

Dad:     Yes?

Ranger:   I couldn't help overhearing. I'm an Everglades  
          Park Ranger, and I escort these air-boat tours.  
          It's perfectly safe, and a wonderful educational  
          experience for children.

Billy/Bobbi:    Yeah! Cool!

Dad:     I don't know... Didn't I read in the *Miami Her-*  
          *ald* that wolves had been reintroduced into the  
          Everglades?

Ranger:   Well, yes. It's one of the glories of our conser-  
          vation program. But they are no danger to  
          humans, I can assure you.

Dad:     (unsure) Well, we were planning to see the  
          Seminole reservation...

Ranger:   Perfect! You could drive around on the highway,  
          and meet the kids there. You can buy their tick-  
          ets from Gideon there, he's the operator. A  
          Seminole himself.

Billy:    Yeah, Dad! Please! Maybe Bobbi and I will see  
          an alligator eat a wolf!

Bobbi:    Or a wolf eat an alligator!

/SFX/    RUNNING FOOTSTEPS/KIDS

Billy:    Or a wolf eat an Indian! Cool!

Bobbi:    Gross!

/MUSIC/        THEME UP AND FADE

## SCENE 2

/SFX/    ENGINE IDLING. FOOTSTEPS APPROACH  
          ON DOCK

Gideon:   'Gator Sam! What's the best trapper in the  
          Everglades doing in town?

Sam:     Selling skins, Gideon, and buying a new rifle.  
          Now I'm heading back to the 'glades. Got a  
          space?



Gideon: For you, always. But on a tourist air-boat?

Sam: I've got a canoe stashed at Snake Creek near the Scar. You go by the Scar, don't you?

Gideon: Not if I can help it, Sam. That place is too creepy for me. But I can drop you at the Res.

Sam: Close enough. I can borrow a john boat from Copperhead Joe.

Gideon: Sure thing, Sam. But you can't bring a rifle on a tourist boat. The Ranger's riding with me, and you know she's a stickler for rules.

Sam: The Ranger? That bleedin' heart? Just sell me a ticket and let me deal with her.

Gideon: Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you, Sam. Come on aboard.

/MUS/ THEME UP AND FADE

### SCENE 3

/SFX/ ENGINE IDLING. FOOTSTEPS APPROACH ON DOCK

Gideon: Can I help you, Ma'am? Want to see the Everglades in all their natural glory?

Lola: Snakes and alligators! Sí, sí – I do and so does Taco, también!

Gideon: Taco?

Lola: Say hello to the nice hombre, Taco.

Taco: Yip! Yip!

Gideon: Sorry but pets aren't–

Lola: Taco isn't a pet, she's a companion, a querido! And she rides right here in my purse!

Gideon: Yes, but...

Lola: She's like her Mommy, she LOVES to be scared, and shiver all over, don't you Taco?

Taco: Yip!

Lola: And we hear there are LOBOS in the Everglades now! We'll sit right there, in front.

Gideon: Well, I don't know...

/SFX/ HIGH HEELS ON GANGPLANK

Lola: Say gracias to the nice man, Taco.

Taco: Yip! Yip!

/MUS/ THEME UP AND FADE

### SCENE 4

/SFX/ ENGINE IDLING. SOUND OF WHEELS ON PIER

Monte: Hey! Hey you! The Indian brave in the captain's hat. You deaf or something?

Gideon: (annoyed) The name is Gideon Small. What can I do for you?

Monte: Do for me? Isn't that obvious? I want a ride on your pathetic little air-boat.

Gideon: Sorry, but...

Monte: No buts about it. Isn't your air-boat wheelchair accessible?

Gideon: Hell no. We only seat six. There's no room for a wheelchair.

Monte: Then make room. It's a federal law. Besides, don't you recognize me?

Gideon: Sure. An obnoxious loudmouth in an expensive wheelchair.

Monte: Very funny. I am none other than Monte O'Malley, the acclaimed science-fiction writer. And I am researching a story set in the Everglades.

/SFX/ WHEELS ROLLING ON PIER

Monte: Stand aside! I am a Hugo nominee.

Gideon: Whoah! You can back that thing up right now!

Ranger: I'm afraid he's right, Gideon. It's a federal law – wheelchair access.

Monte: The skinny broad in the Ricky Ranger get-up speaks truth, Tonto. I have rights and privileges guaranteed under the law.

Gideon: Okay, okay! But put your wheelchair in the middle, and lock the wheels. Stay clear of the propeller. And shut up!

/MUS/ THEME UP AND FADE

### SCENE 5

/SFX/ GUNNING OF MOTOR

Gideon: Take your seats, folks, here we go...

/SFX/ RUNNING STEPS ON PIER

Messenger: Gideon, wait! We have a package! For the clinic at the Res.

Gideon: What is it?

Messenger: Blood plasma, couple of plastic IV bags. Emergency, for a chainsaw accident victim.

Gideon: Toss them here. I'm running late already.

/SFX/ GUNNING OF MOTOR/ BOAT PULLING AWAY FROM DOCK

Lola: Here we go, Taco! Don't growl at the nice children.

Bobbi: It's okay, we're not nice. Hey, mister, how'd you lose your legs?

Monte: I still have my legs, here under this lap robe. If it's any of your business, you nosy brat.

Billy: So why are you in a wheelchair?

Monte: Paralyzed. They don't have any feeling. A – uh (he's lying) mountain climbing accident in Tibet.

Billy: Cool.

Bobbi: Gross! Did you see a yeti?

Monte: Of course...

Ranger: Here we go! Hey, 'Gator Sam. How's trapping?

Sam: Better than ever, Ranger. The gators are plentiful – and big. I just hope your precious wolves don't get to them before I do.

Ranger: No chance of that. But Sam, I'll have to ask you to let me carry the rifle. We are heading into a protected wilderness.

Sam: How about if I just unload it?

/SFX/ SNICK/SNACK, SNICK/SNACK

Sam: And toss the shells into the water.

/SFX/ SHELLS HIT WATER

Sam: How's that for EC, Ranger?

Ranger: EC? You mean those gruesome old horror comics?

Sam: No, I mean Environmentally Correct.

Ranger: No need to be sarcastic, Sam. We're on the same side. My job is to protect the Everglades and the endangered species.

Sam: Like the wolves? Who's going to protect us from them?

Gideon: Sit tight folks, here we go!

/SFX/ GUNNING OF ENGINE

/MUS/ THEME UP AND FADE

## SCENE 6

/SFX/ AIR-BOAT SPEEDING ALONG. HUM OF ENGINE IN BACKGROUND BEHIND DIALOGUE

Gideon: Welcome aboard the *Seminole Warrior*, folks. The air-boat is especially designed for the Everglades. That big airplane propeller in the back can push us along at over 40 mph. And we only need a few inches of water. Even wet grass will do. (a beat) But stay clear of the prop, folks. It's every bit as dangerous as it looks! (beat) And now I'll turn you over to our trusty Ranger.

Ranger: Welcome to the Everglades, America's last great trackless wilderness, folks. Keep your eyes open and you'll see lots of wildlife. There on your left, sunning on that mud bank – an alligator! An old bull.

Bobbi: Look, Billy. It's huge!

Billy: Cool! Probably just ate a couple of kids like us.

Bobbi: Gross!

Ranger: Alligators don't eat people, kids. They mostly eat small animals.

Lola: Ooooohhh! Hear that, Taco? Better stay in my purse.

Taco: Yip! Yip!

Sam: Wrong, Ranger.

Ranger: What? What's that, Sam?

Sam: Things have changed since that airplane crash a few years back. All the 'gators I have trapped this year have had human remains in their stomachs.

Monte: Really? Sounds like a story there! What crash?

Gideon: Econojet flight 22 went down a few miles from here with 223 passengers and eight crew members aboard. Dove straight into the swamp. The bodies were never recovered.

Sam: They were recovered, all right. By the 'gators, the 'possums, and the 'coons. Plus your precious wolves. They have all developed a taste for human flesh.

Bobbi: Cool!

Billy: Gross!

Ranger: Sam, please! You're interfering with the spirit of the tour.

Sam: Sorry I'm not EC – Environmentally Correct.

Monte: The grotesque events you are so crudely relating would make an entertaining story in capable hands. Like mine. I'm a Hugo Nominee.

MUSIC THEME UP AND FADE

## SCENE 7

/SFX/ ENGINE SOUND/AIR-BOAT SPEEDING THROUGH SWAMP

Ranger: These swampy meadows are home to many fascinating wild creatures, such as... Oh, listen! Gideon can you throttle back for a moment?

/SFX/ ENGINE SOUND DROPS TO IDLE

/SFX/ DISTANT HOWLING OF WOLVES

Ranger: That's the most beautiful sound in nature. The sound of ecological success! Of environmental recovery!

Sam: (mutters) Sounds like wolves to me.

Ranger: (ignoring him) The swamp wolf has been reintroduced into its natural habitat – the Everglades. It's all part of the effort to restore the balance of nature.

/SFX/ WOLVES CLOSER

Lola: Look, Taco! Lobos! Aren't they scary!

Taco: Yip! Yip!

Monte: Are they man-eaters too?

Sam: When they can be. There is no balance to nature. It's all just kill and be killed.

Billy: Killer wolves. Cool!

Bobbi: And here they come! Gross!

Ranger: They're getting too close, Gideon. We'd better go.

/SFX/ ENGINE REVS UP

/SFX/ AIR-BOAT AT SPEED.

/SFX/ HOWLING OF WOLVES

Bobby: Look, the wolves are following us!

Billy: How can they run so fast in the swamp?

Ranger: The water is only a inch or so deep. And their paws are big and wide.

Sam: And their claws are sharp!

Lola: What if they catch us? Que maldito!

Gideon: Don't worry about that. Nothing can keep up with this air-boat as long as – whoa! What's that!?!

/SFX/ ENGINE NOISE DROPS SUDDENLY

Ranger: Why are we stopping, Gideon?

Ranger: The channel is blocked by a fallen cypress!

Ranger: Can't you go around it?

Gideon: No way! Too tight!

/SFX/ WOLVES HOWLING, CLOSER

Sam: Our furry friends are getting closer. We'd better cut across the sawgrass.

Ranger: No way! The whole point of this Everglades tour is to respect the environment. I insist that you to stay in the channels, Gideon.

Gideon: That means going straight through the Scar. Not me!

Ranger: Oh, Gideon! Don't be superstitious. We can go through the Scar.

/SFX/ ENGINE ROARS/ AIR-BOAT SPEEDS OFF

Monte: The Scar! What's that?

Sam: The crater where the airliner dove into the muck at 400 mph.

Bobbi: Gross!

Billy: Cool!

Gideon: It was anything but cool. The jet hit so hard

that nothing larger than a door handle was ever found.

Ranger: It was a major environmental disaster.

Sam: It was a disaster for the 331 lost souls on board, too. Or aren't humans "endangered" enough to deserve your sympathy?

Ranger: Cut me some slack, Sam, okay? (a beat) There's the Scar, up ahead. Gideon, you can go straight across, since the area is already polluted.

Gideon: I'm telling you, it creeps me out, Ranger. I always go around the Scar if I can—

/SFX/ HOWLING OF WOLVES, CLOSER

Gideon: But those wolves are getting too close for comfort. So here goes!

/SFX/ ENGINE ROARS, FASTER

/MUS/ THEME UP AND FADE

## SCENE 8

/SFX/ ENGINE SOUND, BOAT SPEEDING ALONG

Monte: This is the Scar? I thought you said it was a crater.

Sam: It filled in with muck right away.

Bobbi: I don't see anything creepy.

Billy: Me neither. Just stupid grass.

Ranger: If you stepped off the air-boat into that "grass," you would sink to your waist.

Lola: I think it's lovely. Look how green, Taco!

Taco: Yip! Yip!

Sam: Greener than a golf course. All those body parts made good fertilizer. Good food, too. See that 'gator, so sleek and fat?

Bobbi: Cool!

Billy: Gross!

Sam: See how he looks at us? He has developed a taste for human flesh. Like our endangered friends, the wolves. Listen—

/SFX/ HOWLING OF WOLVES

Monte: Look at the pack! There must be a hundred of them!

Lola: Don't look, Taco! Los lobos are too scary for a little poquito querido like you!

Taco: Yip! Yip!

/SFX/ ENGINE IS STRAINING

Monte: Why are we slowing down, Geronimo?

Gideon: The grass is getting thicker...

/SFX/ HOWLING OF WOLVES, CLOSER

Sam: ...and the wolves are getting closer! Step on it, Gideon!

Gideon: The mud is stickier here, the grass thicker. That's why I avoid the Scar. That and the smell...

Bobbi: Cool! It smells like that dead dog we found by the highway.

Billy: Yeah, gross!

Ranger: You kids shut up and sit still.

/SFX/ HOWLING OF WOLVES CLOSER

Ranger: (sotto voce) Just hit it, Gideon, and let's get out of here!

Gideon: I'm trying, I'm trying.

/SFX/ ENGINE IS STRAINING

Lola: I can see their teeth!! Ooooh, Taco, close your little ojos. Don't look!

Taco: Yip! Yip!

Monte: Get me out of here, you stupid Indian!

Gideon: Sam, can you get a shot? Slow them down?

Ranger: You can't shoot an endangered species!

Sam: You took all my shells anyway, Ranger, remember?

/SFX/ HOWLING OF WOLVES, CLOSER AND CLOSER

Monte: I have a gun.

Ranger/Sam: What?!?!?

Monte: Here, under my lap robe! Take it! Kill them all!

Sam: With this thing? It's just a Derringer! Two shots, and only .22 calibre!

Monte: Give it back, then.

Sam: No, no. Maybe it will slow them down.

Ranger: Sam, I forbid you! You can't shoot an endangered species! I'll have you arrested!

Monte: Kill them! I can't die like this! I'm a Hugo nominee.

Lola: Close your eyes, Taco!

Taco: Yip!

Ranger: Sam, no!

Sam: Yes!

/SFX/ SHOTS: BLAM! BLAM!

/SFX/ WEIRD SCREAM

/SFX/ THRASHING, SNARLING, GROWLING.

Bobbi: He shot the alligator! Cool!

Billy: And now the wolves are eating it! Gross!

Gideon: And we're getting out of here while the getting is good!

/SFX/ STRAINING ENGINE, FASTER

/MUS/ THEME UP AND FADE

## SCENE 9

/SFX/ BOAT STRUGGLING ALONG, NOT AS FAST AS BEFORE

Ranger: That was smart, Sam, I must admit. The 'gators aren't endangered. And you saved us by slowing down the wolves.

Sam: But now this little gun is empty. And listen—

/SFX/ WOLVES HOWLING

Monte: Here they come again! Faster, you slow-witted Seminole.

/SFX/ ENGINE STRAINING

Gideon: I'm going as fast as I can. And you can keep your racist opinions to yourself, you big phony.

Monte: Phony? You're talking to a Hugo nominee!

Gideon: Numb-knee, you mean. But I'll bet you're just faking that wheelchair bit so you can get the best parking spots.

Ranger: Oh, shut up, both of you! We're almost at the centre of the Scar. The Res is on the other side, only about three miles. Then we'll be safe.

/SFX/ ENGINE STRAINING

/SFX/ SOUND OF HOWLING

Sam: They don't look too endangered to me, Ranger. There must be a hundred of them.

Ranger: Can we go any faster, Gideon?

/SFX/ ENGINE STRAINING

/SFX/ SCRAPING NOISE

Gideon: We're scraping on something. It's slowing us down.

Sam: We're at the centre of the scar, where the remains of the plane bubble up.

Bobbi: Look! Twisted metal!

Billy: And bones! Skulls and stuff!

Bobbi: Cool!

Billy: Gross!

/SFX/ SCRAPING NOISE

/SFX/ ENGINE STRAINING

Sam: It's not slowing the wolves down. They're coming faster than ever!



/SFX/ HOWLING OF WOLVES, CLOSER

Monte: Step on the gas, Crazy Horse, you pathetic aboriginal!

/SFX/ ENGINE RACING/SCRAPING NOISE

Gideon: No good! The air-boat's too heavy! We've got to throw something overboard!

Sam: How about these?

Gideon: Put those down, Sam! They're for the clinic! They're to save a man's life!

Monte: What about our lives? My death would diminish literature itself. I'm a Hugo nominee!

Ranger: Sam's right, Gideon! The plasma will lighten the load, and slow down the wolves!

Sam: Over the side with them!

/SFX/ SPLASH! SPLASH!

/SFX/ SNARLS AND GROWLS, DIMINISHING

/SFX/ ENGINE STRAINING

Ranger: It's working. They stopped.

Sam: They have a taste for human blood. That's why they hang out here at the Scar.

Bobbi: Look at them tear into those bags of blood. Cool!

Billy: Gross!

Lola: Ooooooh! Don't look, Taquito!

Taco: Yip!

Gideon: Only another mile and a half!

/SFX/ ENGINE LABOURS, SLOWS.

Monte: Step on the gas, you geriatric Geronimo! Why are we slowing down again?

/SFX/ WEIRD SCRAPING SOUNDS

Gideon: We're still scraping. Have to lighten the load! Is there something else we can throw overboard?

Monte: How about these worthless guns?

Sam: Not my new Winchester!!

/SFX/ SPLASH! SPLASH!

Billy: Wow, what a throw! Who woulda thought a cripple would have an arm?!

Monte: My legs may be numb, but my arms are strong from pushing a wheelchair. Nature compensates, you know.

Sam: Here comes nature now! Red in tooth and claw!

/SFX/ HOWLING OF WOLVES

Monte: Put the pedal to the metal, you ineffective Apache!

/SFX/ ENGINE LABOURS/SCRAPING SOUNDS

Gideon: We're moving, but not fast enough. Throw something else over, anything!

Sam: The wheelchair! Help me dump this dude onto the deck!

Monte: No! I'm federally protected!

/SFX/ SOUNDS OF SCUFFLE

Ranger: Our lives are at stake, mister! We'll buy you another wheelchair!

/SFX/ SPLASH!

/SFX/ ENGINE ROARS

Gideon: That speeded us up – but it didn't slow them down.

/SFX/ HOWLING OF WOLVES

Billy: I can see their teeth! Cool!

Bobbi: Gross!

Lola: Oooooh! Don't look, Taco.

Taco: Yip!

Monte: That's it! Gimme that cowering canine!

Lola: No! Taco!

Taco: (diminishing into distance) Yip! Yip! Yip!

/SFX/ GROWLS AND SNARLS, DIMINISHING

Bobbi: They're tearing the little mutt to pieces. Cool!

Billy: Gross!

Lola: (sobs) Poor Taco! Pobrecita!

Monte: We'll buy you another one, lady.

/SFX/ STRAINING ENGINE

/MUS/ THEME UP AND FADE

## SCENE 10

/SFX/ ENGINE STRAINING AS BOAT LABOURS ALONG

Gideon: Only another mile! I can see the pier at the Res.

/SFX/ HOWLING OF WOLVES

Sam: The dog was only an appetizer. They're gaining on us again, Gideon!

/SFX/ LABOURING ENGINE

Monte: Do something, you ridiculous redskin!

/SFX/ SCRAPING SOUNDS

Gideon: It's the bones, the debris, bubbling up out of the Scar... We're scraping again.

Ranger: Anything else we can toss? Anything!?

Gideon: The metal cage that covers the propeller. But be careful. That prop can take off an arm as clean as a razor.

/SFX/ TEARING OF METAL

Sam: Got it! Help me lift it, Ranger! Stand clear—

/SFX/ SPLASH

/SFX/ ENGINE SPEEDS UP

Gideon: Good going! Only a quarter mile to the Res!  
There's an electric fence there, and we'll be safe.

/SFX/ SCRAPING SOUNDS

Billy: They're still coming. Cool!

/SFX/ HOWLING OF WOLVES

Bobbi: More than ever! Gross!

Gideon: We have to slow them down again!

Monte: That's it! There are too many people on this air-boat! We have to sacrifice one.

Ranger: That's a horrible idea!

Monte: It's a horrible situation. But not unheard of. Did you ever read "The Cold Equations"? I think it won a Hugo.

/SFX/ ENGINE LABOURS OVER SCRAPING SOUNDS

Gideon: Stuck again! And here they come!

/SFX/ WOLVES GETTING CLOSER

Sam: I hate to admit it, but he's right. We have to do something that will slow down the wolves as well as lighten the boat.

Monte: One of you can save the rest of us!

Ranger: But how do we decide — who dies?

Sam: Let's draw straws. It's the only way we'll make it.

Bobbi: A game. Cool!

Billy: Like "Survivor." Gross!

Monte: "Survivor" in reverse, you mean. You'll have to leave me out of the drawing. I'm handicapped — protected under federal law. Besides, I'm a Hugo nominee.

Gideon: No straw for me, either. I'm driving the air-boat.

Ranger: Personally, I'd be willing to make the sacrifice, but I'm a federal employee on duty, and I can't participate in games of chance.

Sam: That leaves me and Lola — and the kids.

Monte: That's it! The trapper! He's a social misfit and a recluse. Who would miss him?

Sam: I would.

Monte: All right, then. How about the kids? Hell, they're a matched set. One would be enough to save us, and the father would still have one left.

Billy/Bobbi: Grosssss! Waaaah! Waaaaah!

Monte: Okay, okay! Jeez, what babies!

/SFX/ HOWLING OF WOLVES, CLOSER AND CLOSER

Gideon: We'd better come up with something — fast!

Lola: Tengo un idea! I have it!

Monte: There you go! Who's going to miss an old lady? And she probably doesn't want to live without her precious pet, anyway — right?

Sam: (to Lola) What's your idea, Ma'am?

Lola: Un idea that will save us all! (whispers loudly)

Ranger: That's disgusting!

Bobbi: Cool!

Billy: Gross!

Sam: Perfect! No one will have to die!

Gideon: Good idea, but hurry!

Monte: What are you fools whispering about? I hope you come up with something that will save us.

Sam: I think we have...

/SFX/ FOOTSTEPS ON DECK

Monte: Get away from me! Why are you all looking at me like that?

Sam: Give me a hand here, Ranger.

/SFX/ HOWLING OF WOLVES, VERY CLOSE

Ranger: Gladly. If we're going to do this, we'd better hurry.

Monte: What are you doing! You can't throw me overboard! I'm federally protected! I'm a Hugo nominee!

Sam: We're not going to throw you overboard. Not all of you, anyway. Gideon, rev the prop as fast as it will go!

/SFX/ RACING ENGINE

Monte: Nooo! Nooooo!

Sam: Why not! You said yourself, you have no feelings in your legs!

Monte: No, you don't understand...

/SFX/ REVVED PROP. CHOPPING SOUND

Monte: No! Noooooooooo!

Lola: Don't look, children!

Bobbi: It's like Mommy's burger-grinder. Cool!

Billy: Gross!

Sam: Feed him in slow, Ranger. As long as he can't feel it, we have to chop him up fine. One leg at a time. That's it!

/SFX/ REVVED PROP. CHOPPING SOUND.

Monte: No! Noooooooooo! Aaaaahhh!

/SFX/ SNARLING AND GROWLING OF WOLVES

Billy: The propeller is spraying blood and gore all over. Gross!

Bobbi: The wolves love it, like hamburger! Cool!

/SFX/ REVVED PROP

/SFX/ CHOPPING SOUND

Sam: Whoa! Let's stop here, just above the knee. That's good. Now, Gideon, let's try it.

/SFX/ REVVING ENGINE, AIR-BOAT GAINS SPEED

Gideon: It worked. We're moving again!

/SFX/ WOLVES SNARLING AND GROWLING, DIMINISHING

Ranger: And the wolves are too busy eating to chase us. For the moment, anyway.

/MUS/ THEME UP AND FADE

## SCENE 11

/SFX/ IDLING ENGINE, AS IN BEGINNING

Gideon: Safe! We're inside the electric fence.

Ranger: Hello on the dock, give us a hand! We have an injured man aboard.

Sam: He passed out while he was saving our lives.

Ranger: Wonder why he passed out. I thought he had no feeling in his legs...

Gideon: Maybe it was the shock – the idea of it.

Sam: Or maybe you were right, Gideon, and he was just faking the handicap to get parking spots.

Ranger: OOOHHH! What a horrible thought!

Lola: It's true. I saw him flinch when pobrecito Taquito bit him. That's when I got the idea.

Sam: Nature is cruel, but just. Right, Ranger?

Billy: Cool!

Bobbi: Gross!

Gideon: Lift him carefully, folks.

Ranger: Yeah, don't drop him. He saved all our lives.

Sam: Plus, he's a Hugo nominee.

/SFX/ FOOTSTEPS ON PIER

Dad: There you are, kids. What took so long?

Billy: We had a neat adventure, Dad.

Bobbi: Wolves and everything, Dad! But we have one question.

Ranger: Yes, kids?

Bobbi/Billy: What's a Hugo nominee?

Dad: Beats me.

Sam: I can answer that. It's a science-fiction writer.

Billy: Cool!

Bobbi: Gross!

/MUS/ THEME UP AND FADE

## The End

**Terry Bisson** lives in New York, although he is a Southerner by background. He is the author of many well-received short stories, novels and non-fiction books; and he tells us that the above short unpublished play "is based on an old EC Comics *Tales of the Crypt* plot idea." He adds that, in September 2002, "it will be performed live at the SF Worldcon in San Jose, by me and Mike Resnick, Nancy Kress and Stan Robinson and Janis Ian."



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# To Become a Warrior

*Chris Beckett*

Where I live it's the Thurston Fields estate only we just call it the Fields. Which it's what they call a Special Category Estate which is crap for a start because everyone knows it's a dreg estate and we're the dreggies. Which is we're the ones they haven't got any use for, yeah? I mean fair enough, I can't hardly read and write as such. Which I've never had a job or nothing only once I had a job in this tyre and exhaust place. Like a job creation scheme? Only I was late the second day – right? – and the manager, he only told me to do something about my attitude, so I fucking smacked him one, didn't I?

And I'll tell you what mate, not being funny or nothing, but if you never lived on a dreg estate you've got no idea what it's like. You might think you have but you haven't. I'll tell you one thing about it, the Department runs your life. The DeSCA, yeah? The deskies we call them. Which you get different kinds, like housing deskies which if you're some girl who gets pregnant, they're the ones who get you a flat. (Mind you, if you're a *bloke* and you want a flat you've got to find some slag and say you love her and that, know what I mean?) And you get teacher deskies, and benefits deskies. You even get deskie police. But I tell you what, mate, the ones we really hate are the fucking social worker deskies. Like they try to be so nice and understanding and that, all *concerned* about you – know what I mean? – but next thing they're taking your fucking kid away.

Like my girlfriend Kylie, well my ex-girlfriend because I dumped her, didn't I? Which she had her kid Sam taken off her and she went fucking *mental*, know what I mean? I mean, fair play, he is a whinging little git and at first I thought, great, all day in bed and no distractions. But it did her head in and she was crying

and that, and she was down the Child Welfare every day and she didn't want fucking sex no more or nothing so I thought to myself, I can't hack this, *I'll* go fucking mental, know what I mean?

(Which then she tried to top herself which her mum said was down to me but it never. It was the fucking deskies.)

Anyway, one day I was down the Locomotive with my mates when this geezer comes in – yeah? – and he only had a skull tattooed all over his face! I mean like so his face *looked* like a skull, yeah? Which my mate Shane goes, "Shit, look at *that!*" This bloke he looked *well* hard, but – yeah? – we must have had twelve pints each minimum, so I thought to myself, fuck it. And I go up to this skull geezer – right? – and go like, "Who the fuck are you?" (Shane was pissing himself, the prat. He thought it was hysterical. He thought old skull face there was going to beat the shit out of me.)

But the skull guy just laughs.

And he was like, "I'm Laf, who the hell are you?"

So I go, "I'm Carl. What kind of name is Laf for fuck's sake?"

And he was like, "Watch it mate," only he was laughing, know what I mean? And he goes, "It's short for Olaf. It's a warrior's name, alright? I'm a warrior of Dunner I am."

Which I'll tell you what, back then I didn't know what the fuck he meant but I didn't want to look like a prat or nothing so I just go, "Warrior of Dunner, huh?" (You know, American and that).

And he laughs and goes, "You don't know what I'm talking about, do you mate?"

So I go, "No I don't, mate, but I reckon you're talking



out of your arse.”

But he just kind of looks round the pub at the blokes slagging each other off by the pool table and at the kids arsing about on the machines and at that old slag Dora with her wrecked fucking face who comes in every night and drinks till they chuck her out.

So he looks all round – right? – and then he looks back at me and he’s like, “This place is shit isn’t it?”

And I’m like, “Yeah?” Because, like, I can see what he means in a way but I drink there every bloody night.

And he goes, “Want to come and meet some of my mates?”

And I’m, “Yeah okay.”

And he’s, “Only I’ve taken a liking to you Carl. I liked the way you came over like that. More bottle than your mates there.”

Well then we walk straight out past Shane and Derek and they’re like trying to make out it’s hysterical – yeah? – but really they’re bloody gobsmacked, aren’t they?

And Derek goes, “Where the fuck are you going Carl?”

But I don’t know, do I?

Laf’s got his car out there – it’s like a really old Mondeo – and, it was well good, we ton across the estate at 90, with the windows down and the music on full blast. (Well the police don’t bother with the Fields at night, only if there’s a riot or something.)

And we go up Thurston Road, right up near the wire where there is them three big old tower blocks – yeah? – which are all sealed off and that because they’ve been like condemned. (I mean: they’ve always been condemned and sealed off like that since I was a kid, because of asbestos or something, I think.)

Me and my mates, we’ve tried to get into those places but they’re like not just boarded up they’re *steeled* up – yeah? – with metal plates and that. Only it turns out that Laf and his mates have managed to get into one of them called Progress House. Like there’s a kind of service door or something round the back which it still looks like it’s locked up but they can get in and out, yeah?

Inside it was really dark and echoey and it smelt of piss. You couldn’t see nothing but Laf goes charging off up the stairs: one floor, two floors, three floors...

“Wait for me,” I go.

But Laf just laughs and he’s like, “You’ll have to get fitter than that, mate, if you want to be a warrior of Dunner.”

Those places are like twelve stories high, yeah? Which right at the top they’d opened up a flat. You could smell the puff smoke from a floor below. Which there’s this room in there, like a cave – yeah? – with candles and that, and weird pictures on the wall, and there are Laf’s mates, three of them: one fat bloke in one corner, one really evil-looking bloke with greasy black hair in the other corner and then this boffy-looking fucker in the middle. And he’s got glasses on and he’s rolling up a spliff.

“Good evening,” he goes, really posh. And he’s like,

“Welcome to Progress House. This is Gunnar” (that was the fat one), “this is Rogg and my name is Erik. Delighted to make your acquaintance.”

I look at Laf and I’m like, “Who the *fuck* is this?”

And Laf don’t say nothing in words but he’s kind of frowning at me – right? – like he’s going, “Respect, man! This geezer is well hard, know what I mean?”

(Which, like, *he’s* got a skull all over his face!)

Erik laughs, “A word of advice, Carl. Laf has chosen to let you into our little secret. We do that from time to time, because we are, well, we’re *missionaries* in a way.” (I didn’t know what he was talking about at first. I thought missionary meant, like, sex with the geezer on top, know what I mean?)

“But if you were to reveal our secret to anyone else without our permission,” goes boffy Erik, “I personally will kill you. I mean that quite literally. And I assure you that what I have just said is not a threat but a promise.”

And Laf is like, “He means it, mate, he’s well evil. He’d kill a bloke, no sweat at all.”

And Erik laughed really pleasant – yeah? – like some posh bloke on the telly.

You would not believe all the gear they had up there, yeah? We did E’s and A’s and M’s and C’s and fuck knows what else until the walls were wobbling like jelly – yeah? – and it was like Erik was talking into this blob of jelly from outside somewhere, down some tube or something.

“Have you heard of Dunner, Carl?” he goes. “Or Thor, some call him?”

And I’m like, “...er, no, don’t think so, mate...” – right? – like I’m talking up this tube?

“Well, he used to be *big* around here,” goes Erik. “Thurston *means* Thor’s town for one thing. Did you know that? Come to that he’s got a whole day of the week named after him. Thursday means Thor’s day.”

“Yeah,” goes Laf, “and Wednesday’s named after his dad, right, Erik?”

“That’s right,” goes Erik. “Woden’s day.”

And I’m like, “...Yeah?” (Which if anyone else had come up with this shit I would just have laughed, know what I mean?)

“Dunner or Thor,” goes Erik, “is the god of thunder. And he’s a warrior god. His weapon is a big hammer which crushes anything it strikes. As I say, he used to be big around here. Your ancestors would have worshipped him. They would have sacrificed to him too, animals and even human beings. So you can see they took him very seriously indeed.”

And I’m like “So?” but I don’t say nothing.

“And now,” goes Erik, “here is another secret. But this one I *am* happy for you to tell who you like. Because it’s the government who wants it kept as a secret. It’s the politicians and the do-gooders. It’s them who don’t want anyone to know.”

Well the room was as big as a fucking football pitch now – right? – with that Erik talking over the p.a. in a big echoey voice like God or something.

"Do you think about the universe at all, Carl?"

"As in, like, the sun goes round the earth?" I go. "Stars and that?"

Erik does his nice TV laugh.

"That's it, Carl, you've got it in one. Stars and that. But listen and I'll tell you something. The whole of this universe of stars and space is just one tiny twig in an enormous tree and every second, every fraction of a second, it's branching and dividing, making new worlds."

I laughed. But – it was weird, yeah? – I could fucking see it. Only it didn't look like a tree. More like millions of black worms in the dark that kept on splitting in two and splitting in two and splitting in two – yeah? – like viruses or something.

"There are millions of other earths, millions of other Englands, millions of other Thurston Fields estates," he goes – and like I said, he's like God or something, I couldn't even see him with all the E's and A's and shit going round me, just hear his big echoey voice all round me.

"And we don't come from this one," he goes, "Laf and Gunnar and Rogg and I, we're shifters, we come from another world. Anytime we want to we can go to another world too. So we can do what we want here. We can do whatever we want. No one is ever going to catch us."

I heard him moving about somewhere out there, know what I mean, like he's on a different planet?

"Look at these!" he goes.

Well I'm lying on the floor with my eyes shut and when I open my eyes, even though it's only candles in there, it still feels, like, too bright, know what I mean? So it's a job to see anything at all as such – yeah? – but I see he's holding out a bag with pills in it, hundreds of dark little pills.

"These are seeds, these are Lok seeds. Every one of these will take us to another world. Think of that. We can travel between the branches of the tree like Dunner does, with his hammer in his hand."

And then that Rogg speaks, that evil bastard with the greasy black hair, and he's a Scotchman or a Geordie or something.

"Yeah," he goes, "and you know what we're looking for, mate? We're looking for one of Dunner's worlds. Know what I mean?"

I go, "Yeah?"

"He means a world where Dunner is still worshipped today," goes Erik. "We know they exist because the seeds come from there and because of shifter stories. There are thousands like us, you see, Carl, thousands of warriors of Dunner moving between the worlds. And we tell each other stories. We swap news."

Then that fat bloke talks: Gunnar. You know how some big fat blokes have these, like, really high little mild little voices? Which Gunnar was one of them, right? He had this gentle little voice – yeah? – really polite and high. I'll tell you what, though, I reckon he could beat you to a fucking pulp. But he'd still talk to you like really kind and gentle while he was doing it – yeah? – in that small little gentle high voice.

And he's like, "Do you want to know what it's like in

Dunner's worlds, Carl?"

And I'm "Yeah" and he goes, "Tell him what it's like, Erik, he probably doesn't know!"

(Which I've got my eyes closed again – right? – and those black worms are splitting and wriggling and splitting all the time all round me. But those shifter geezers' voices are far away, coming down like from like ten miles above me or something.)

"Of course," goes Erik, "of course..." and he's drawing breath, like this is the good part coming up...

"Does *civilization* mean anything to you Carl?" he asks, "Or *democracy*? Or *human rights*?"

"You *what*?" I go, not being funny or nothing, but I don't know what the fuck he's talking about.

But they all laugh like I've made a really good joke! So I feel well chuffed, don't I?

"They don't mean shit to me!" I go, like doing the joke again.

"Of course they don't Carl," goes Erik kindly, "and do you know why?"

"Because I don't give a monkey's," I go, but they're tired of the joke now and they don't laugh no more.

"The reason civilization doesn't mean anything to you, Carl," Erik goes, "is that civilization isn't there for your benefit. You're not *part* of civilization. Civilization is for the others out there across the wire. They don't care what you think. They don't care about what you can and can't do. They give you a dreg estate to live in and a DeSCA department to look after you. All they ask in return is that you leave them alone with their civilization. Just keep out of the way, is all they ask, and let them get on with their civilization in peace."

"Yeah?" I go.

"Carl don't want to know all that, Erik mate," goes fat Gunnar in his little kind voice. "He wants to know about *Dunner's* worlds."

"I was coming to that," goes Erik and he, like, growls. He don't like being interrupted.

"You see Carl, in Dunner's worlds there is no civilization, no democracy, no human rights. And there's no DeSCA either, no Special Category estates, no wire. A young chap like you doesn't have to go to the deskies for money or a place to live. No. What you'd do in one of Dunner's worlds is find yourself a lord. A *warlord*, I mean, a great warrior, not some toffee-nosed do-gooder who sits on committees about social exclusion and goes to the opera. You'd go to a lord and, if you promised to fight his enemies for him, he'd look after you, he'd make sure you got everything you needed."

"Yeah?" I go.

"And Carl, mate," goes fat Gunnar, "that wouldn't be like a deskie flat or nothing he'd give you. Don't think that, mate. He'd have a big hall, with a big fire in the middle, and you'd live there with all your mates. And you'd drink all you wanted, mate, and eat all you wanted and get as pissed as you wanted and when it was time to sleep, well you'd just sleep there in the hall, with all your mates around you. So you wouldn't never have to think about money or nothing, and you wouldn't never have to be alone. How does that sound, my old mate?"

I laughed. "That sounds like fucking heaven mate."

"Yeah, and you don't need to *work* or nothing," goes old skull-face Laf. "All you got to do is *fight*! It's your job, like. You even get to kill people and that and there's no police or nothing to stop you."

Which I'm like "Great!"

"Fair enough it's dangerous," goes Laf. "You could get killed too, know what I mean?"

"So?" I go, laughing. "Who gives a shit? When you're dead you're fucking dead, right?"

"Well said!" goes Erik. "Spoken like a warrior! But actually it's better than that, Carl my friend, it's better than that. If you die fighting, Dunner will take you home to Valour-Hall, where all the brave warriors go, and then you'd live again. And then it's feasting and fighting for ever and ever, until the Last Battle at the end of time."

And Gunnar's like, "So what do you say, then, Carl my old mate? Do you want to be a warrior?"

Well, of *course* I do, don't I?

"Yeah!" I laugh.

"Well there's a test you have to pass," goes Erik, "a little test..."

But one of them is putting this spliff into my hand – yeah? – and I don't know what they put in it but next thing I'm down on my knees half-way through my mum's front door, chucking up all over the fucking lino.

Well, the next few days – right? – I'm like, "Did I dream that or what?"

I even went down there to Progress House – yeah? – and no way could anyone have got in there, know what I mean? Steel plates and massive bloody locks.

Which I go, "Well, I *must* have dreamed it."

But down the Locomotive when Shane and Derek and that go, "Where the fuck d'you go with that skull bloke?" I didn't say nothing, know what I mean? Because – yeah? – I remembered that boffy geezer Erik go, like, "That's not a threat it's a promise."

I didn't feel like taking a chance.

But, like, a couple of weeks later I was just going down to the pub in the morning – right? – when this car pulls up. Which it's only that dodgy old Mondeo and that fat geezer Gunnar driving it.

"Hop in, my old mate!" he goes, leaning back to open the back door.

So I get in the back and that evil Scotch bastard Rogg – yeah? – he's there in the front with Gunnar and he passes me back a spliff and, like, we're off.

Next thing we're at the line and Gunnar is showing his ID to the cop.

And he's like, "Alright mate? How you doing?" in his kind little voice.

"Not so bad," the cop goes. Which he's a bit surprised – yeah? – like he's not used to people being nice to him and that. And he's like, "Have a nice day!" as he lets us through the wire.

Which Rogg laughs and goes, "Anyone tell you yous can't fake deskie ID cards, Carl? Well you can."

And Gunnar's like, "There isn't nothing our Erik can't

figure out, Carl mate. He's one in a million that geezer. He's diamond, mate, he's pure diamond."

We go right across town – right? – to this posh area where I never been before. And Gunnar parks the car – yeah? – and we get out and it's like there's shops that don't sell nothing but coloured fucking *candles* right? And shops that sell little toys made out of painted wood which any normal kid would smash in two seconds flat and they cost like a week's money each. And all these rich bastards in fancy clothes and posh voices – yeah? – like la di da this and la di da that and "Oh really Jonathan, that's ever so sweet of you!" and beautiful bitches in posh sexy clothes like TV stars. And you look at them and think, "*Shit* I fancy you," but you know if you tried anything they'd just laugh at you like you was an alien from space or something with tentacles and that, or eyes on fucking stalks.

And Gunnar goes, "Do you know this place, Carl mate?"

And I go, "No."

And he goes, "It's Clifton Village mate, where the rich people hang out."

"The *beautiful* people," goes Rogg with, like, an evil sneer.

Then Gunnar puts his arm across my shoulders – yeah? – like he's my dad or something.

And he's like, "How's this place make you feel, my old mate?"

And I'm like "How would I fucking know?"

"Angry maybe?" goes Gunnar kindly. "Does it make you feel angry at all mate?"

And I'm, "Nah, I don't give a shit," like with a shrug and that.

And then I go, "Yeah, alright, angry then."

"That's the way, my old mate," goes Gunnar, "That's the way."

Which he's still got his arm round me like he's my dad or my kind uncle.

"Now listen, Carl mate," he goes, "how would you like it if you could do whatever you wanted here?"

And I'm like, "Eh? What d'you mean?"

"How would you like it, Carl," goes Rogg, "if you could smash these shops and burn these cars and fuck these women and blow away any of these smug bastards you wanted?"

"Yes, how would you like that my old mate?" goes Gunnar.

"Well of course I'd like it," I go, "but you're having a laugh with me, aren't you? You're just winding me up."

"No," goes Rogg, "no wind-up, Carl. It's what we're planning to really do. And I'll tell you the beauty of it. The beauty of it is we'll have swallowed seeds, so when the police come along we can just laugh and let them lock us up, because we'll know that in an hour or two we'll be in a different world and they won't ever be able to get us."

And it's like it finally dawns on me, yeah? It dawns on me for the first time. If you're a shifter you can really do shit like that. That's what it would mean to be a warrior of Dunner.

So a big smile spreads over my face – yeah? – and I'm like, "Sweet, man! Fucking sweet!"

"And you can be there," goes Rogg. "You can be there with us if you want to, if you're willing to take the test, like."

And I'm going, "Yeah, no problem, mate, no sweat at all," when this old geezer comes walking past and suddenly stops, like, and looks at me.

"Well, well," he goes. "Carl Pendant isn't it? What a nice surprise! Do you remember me? Cyril Burkitt? How are you doing Carl? It must be all of 15 years."

And he, like, smiles at Rogg and Gunnar – yeah? – like any friend of Carl's is a friend of his. (Which Rogg don't say nothing, and Gunnar's like "Alright, mate. How you doing?")

And I'm like, "Oh alright, you know, mate" and that.

Which he's only my old social worker I used to have when I was in care and that. Which they're all wankers but I sort of liked the bloke. He didn't never get funny with me or nothing – yeah? – like I remember one time when I'd fucked up as per bloody usual and he says to me "You just don't get it do you Carl?" and I go "No I fucking don't" and he laughs and he's like "Well that makes two of us I'm afraid Carl."

Anyway, old Cyril Burkitt looks at Rogg and Gunnar again and he's like, "Well, I won't keep you from your friends Carl. But I'll tell you what, I'm retired now. If you fancy calling by for a chat sometime you'd be very welcome. I don't see such a lot of people these days, you see, so I'm always glad of company. And I've often thought about you over the years and wondered how you were getting on."

And he gives me this little card – yeah? – with his address and that.

Well then I notice Rogg and Gunnar looking at each other with, like, a funny secret sort of look.

Which I'm like, "What?"

"A deskie, right?" goes Rogg.

And I'm like, "Yeah."

Which they look at each other again – yeah? – and sort of nod.

"Well that's your test then, Carl mate," goes Gunnar.

And I'm like, "What is?"

And Rogg goes, "Go to his house, Carl, and kill him."

Well I thought, "This is a joke, yeah?" So I'm laughing and I'm like, "Oh, he's not *that* bad, not for a deskie, know what I mean?"

And Gunnar goes, "No Carl mate, you don't understand. That's your *test*! See what I mean, mate? It's what you've got to do to become a warrior. Are you with me, my old mate?"

"You's got to make a sacrifice for Dunner," goes Rogg.

Which, like, they're just looking at me – yeah? – and waiting.

And I go, "Shit!"

And Gunnar goes, "Fair enough if you don't want to do it, Carl mate. No hard feelings or nothing. But if you do want to be a warrior, well, that's the test you've got

to pass. Know what I mean?"

So I like swallow – yeah? – and I'm thinking, like, well, all deskies are the same really. Alright some of them act nice and that but it don't mean nothing. Which anyway the stupid git, if he goes round giving out his address and that, *some* fucker's going to get him – yeah? – and if it's not me it's going to be some bugger else. So it don't make no difference really anyway.

So I laugh – yeah? – and I go, "Yeah, alright. I'll do it."

So Laf – right? – he takes me over in the car the next day to the place where Cyril Burkitt lives. (Which it's like another part of town which I never heard of. Only I never really been nowhere much outside of the Fields as such, except down the Centre – yeah? – to clubs and that and once we went over to Weston on a school trip and Shane had six pints of lager and threw up all over the teacher.)

And he stops like a couple of streets away and he's like, "Now it's along there and then turn right and it's number 23, right? So don't get lost will you, Carl?"

Which I'm like, "Fuck off," you know, like laughing and that to show I'm not worried or nothing.

So I start to open the door but he's like, "Hang on a minute, Carl mate. You'll need this, you prat!"

Then he gives me a gun as such and it's like, "This is the trigger, mate, and this is the safety catch, and this is a silencer so there won't be any loud bangs or nothing. And listen, mate, there's ten bullets in there, so when he's down, empty the lot into the bastard, know what I mean? Into his head and that, yeah?"

Which I'm like, "No worries mate."

He laughs and lights up a spliff for me.

"I don't need no wacky baccy to give me the bottle for this job mate," I go. "It's no problem mate. It's no sweat."

And he's like, "No Carl, I'm not being funny or nothing, mate. It's just, like, to make it more of a laugh, yeah? Know what I mean?"

Then I'm outside Cyril Burkitt's house – yeah? – and it's doing my head in because I never really thought he had a home or nothing, know what I mean? He was just a deskie, yeah? And, like there's a car outside and flowers and that, and a milk bottle, and there's, like, a little path from the gate made of bricks, and coloured glass in the front door: red and blue and green. And through the front window – right? – there's this big room with loads of books and that. Which I can see him in there – yeah? – reading the paper by himself. And there's music playing, yeah? Violins and that.

So I ring the bell, and he looks up and sees me through the window. Which he, like, smiles and gets up and comes to the door.

"Hello, Carl! This is a nice surprise! I didn't think you'd come. I didn't think you'd have the time for an old deskie like me!"

He's got like a cardigan on, and brown slippers and, like, old-man jeans, and he hasn't shaved yet or nothing. He don't look like a deskie, really. Just some old geezer, know what I mean?



"Come on in, Carl, come on in. Can I get you a cup of tea or something?"

And I'm like, "Yeah, thanks, tea." So we go through into this big kitchen like on telly or something with like wood everywhere and a stone floor and that.

Which he gets the kettle and goes over to the sink to fill it up.

"Let me see now, Carl, is that milk and four sugars? Have I remembered that right?"

Then he turns round smiling and sees the gun in my hand.

And he's like, "Oh."

It's weird, he don't look scared or nothing, just like, *tired*.

"I see," he goes.

And then he laughs! Not like *really* laughs, but like, a little sad sort of laugh. Know what I mean?

"All this hatred!" he goes, "I should be honoured really I suppose. It's almost like being loved."

"You *what*?" I go.

"Never mind, Carl," he goes. "Don't worry about it."

He puts the kettle down slowly and then he goes, "Someone put you up to this, I suppose, Carl? You were never much of a one for thinking things up for yourself."

And I'm like, "Mind your own business."

Which he nods and sort of sighs.

"Listen Carl," he goes, and he's really slow, like he's thinking out loud. "Listen Carl. My wife died a while back and she was the only person in the world I really loved. And then my career sort of petered out, as you may have heard, not that it was ever *much* of a career and not that I was ever much cop at my job – as you probably know better than most, I'm afraid. So I really don't have a huge amount to live for. Oh, I get by alright. I potter around. I weed my garden. I do the crossword. I watch TV. But really it doesn't make much difference to me if my life ends now or whether it goes on for another 20 years. Do you see what I mean? I mean: if you really *need* to shoot me, well, be my guest!"

Well I'm like, "What the fuck?" but I don't say nothing.

"But listen Carl," he goes, "I don't know who put you up to this but, you know, you are *very* easily led. I do suggest you think very carefully about whether it's actually in your interest to shoot me. You really do need to think about that."

And I'm like, "Fuck off, don't give me that deskie shit *now*! Don't give that *concerned* shit," but I don't say nothing.

(Which I really *don't* want to hear this stuff, though, and it's doing my head in as such.)

"I'm worried for you, Carl," he goes, "It probably sounds strange, but I really am."

Which then – yeah? – I can't stand it no more.

"Fuck off!" I shout at him. "Fuck off you stupid deskie bastard. Just leave me alone, alright? Why can't you never leave me alone?"

And I hate the bastard, I fucking *hate* him, know what I mean? I never hated no one like that in my whole life.

And he goes, "Carl! Carl!"

But I'm not staying to listen to this shit. I'm off out of there, mate. I'm *out* of there. I slammed the front door so hard it broke the stupid coloured glass. Red and blue and green splinters all over the poncey little path.

"You didn't do it, did you?" goes Laf.

I don't say nothing.

"Give me the gun, then," he goes.

I give it him.

Well he just drives off then without saying nothing and I spend all day trying to find my way back to the Fields.

Back home my mum's been on the booze and she's like snoring in front of the telly with her false teeth half out, the ugly slag. So I nick some money from her purse – yeah? – and go down the Locomotive. If I'm lucky some bastard will want a fight so I can kick his fucking head in.

It don't make no difference though, does it? I won't never see that Valour-Hall now.

Chris Beckett lives in Cambridge, and last appeared in *Interzone* with "Watching the Sea" (issue 173). His slightly earlier story, "Marcher" (issue 172), has been selected for Gardner Dozois's latest Year's Best SF anthology. His debut novel, *The Holy Machine*, is forthcoming from Big Engine (see their website: [www.bigengine.co.uk](http://www.bigengine.co.uk)).

# interzone

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### THE TALKING DEAD

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When science fiction writers address the general public, they magnificently create. When they address each other, they magnificently complain.

Over the years, I have listened in on some gripe sessions, and jeremiads regarding the woeful plight of the working science fiction writer regularly surface in professional publications. The horrific particulars inspiring the protests vary, but the overview is always the same.

Once upon a time, wise and considerate editors, committed to the highest ideals of science fiction, sought out and nurtured the most talented young writers, caring little about their early profitability as they allowed them to enhance their skills and moulded them into polished, productive, and esteemed pillars of the genre. Contracts were fair and relationships were genial, as authors, agents, editors and publishers all worked cooperatively for their mutual benefit.

Today, however, a plague has descended upon the publishing industry. Soulless accountants who know nothing about science fiction rule the roost, and sales figures are the sole determinants of success; regardless of your book's quality, if not enough copies sell, you are exiled from the industry, forever barred from offering your suspect wares to the public. Instead of being encouraged to create masterpieces, writers are pressured to fritter away their talents on formulaic regurgitations of popular television programmes or novelizations of computer games. Advances are down, contracts are cancelled on a moment's notice, double-dealings are endemic, and profiteers continually conspire to reduce the income and stature of writers in new and even more outrageous fashions. Things are bad, and they are getting worse and worse all the time.

In response to these laments, there are only two things to say: this picture is largely accurate, and there is nothing anyone can do about it.

With apologies to Peter Graham, who opined that "The golden age of science fiction is twelve," one might offer this general advice to science fiction writers:

The golden age of being a science fiction writer is twelve years before you started your career.

Deal with it.

Instead of constantly complaining, writers might pause to feel blessed, since they are living in somebody's else golden age. It's sad but true: pondering a devastating e-mail message or reading some shocking news in a trade publication, a writer today might justifiably think that this is the final blow, this is the last straw, in terms of any sort of respect or dignity

# WHY SCIENCE FICTION FEARS THE FUTURE

*Gary Westfahl*

in the profession of writing, this field has absolutely hit rock bottom. Yet if today's writer endures a while longer, the day will surely come when some neophyte tells her, "But you had it easy – you were writing back in 2002," or "Gee, I wish things could be like they were back in 2002." I'm not kidding; the historical record, which I have some experience in examining, demonstrates that writers in the 1960s waxed nostalgic about the 1950s, writers in the 1970s waxed nostalgic about the 1960s, and so on, consistently maintaining the pattern of discerning a veritable writer's paradise a decade or so in the past. Again, the lyrics keep changing – remember when you could make a living publishing stories in the magazines? remember when publishers maintained a backlist? remember when there wasn't any Internet piracy? – but the song remains the same.

This is not, as some would-be rescuers of science fiction would have it, a problem caused by an influx of stupid and duplicitous figures into the publishing industry, a state of affairs readily corrected by installing smart and honest people, like those making these complaints, in positions of authority. To be sure, there are simpatons and scoundrels aplenty in publishing, but it is not Pollyanna-ish to note that companies rarely stay in business long without displaying, at least sporadically, a modicum of intelligence and integrity. And these traits remain in evidence more in publishing than in other provinces of the entertainment industry, such as those producing films and rock music.

The problem facing publishers is basic and intractable. First, in the last 50 years, there has been an astounding, exponential increase in the numbers of genuinely talented and committed science fiction authors. Second, during that time, there has been substantially less than an exponential increase in the numbers of devoted science fiction readers. Publishers cannot afford to publish all the writers who deserve to be published, because there aren't enough customers to purchase their books. They require some system to weed out writers so that they only publish enough books to meet the demand.

The tool they have chosen for this task is the bottom line: you sell enough books, and you publish another one; you don't sell enough books, and you're out of luck. Some find this shortsighted; don't publishers understand that they need to give authors time to find their voices, to build an audience of loyal readers, in order to develop dependable brand names for their books? Don't they see they are setting themselves up for future disaster, when established stars fade away they have cultivated no suitable replacements? Yet today, the answer is no, publishers *don't* need to give new authors time to grow, because gifted writers are like buses, there's always another one coming along. Publishers can afford to keep throwing talent away because new talent is always available; they can keep tossing new writers onto bookstore shelves until they hit upon a winner. Publishers in the 1980s didn't need to squander resources on a bunch of promising unknowns, hoping one might eventually become the next William Gibson; they just kept trying out new models, and sure enough, there materialized Neal Stephenson.

I'm not saying the system is fair. Of course, books can have disappointing sales for reasons that have nothing to do with their quality, such as terrible timing, abominable cover art, non-existent promotion, and flawed distribution, and writers can expound at length on how they have been victimized by all of the above and more. But publishers don't require a fair system – they require a functioning system. And going by the bottom line functions perfectly well as a selection process.

To be frank, I even suspect that this new, much-criticized system might have a few advantages over the old, much-idealized system, inasmuch as people forget that all those lucky writers being nurtured by paternal publishers were not necessarily the best and the brightest. I was once on a panel with a noted writer when the question on the floor was how to find an agent; he replied that he had found an agent while playing a game of

poker with some New York professionals. Today, at least, promising writers find it easier to get their foot in the door without being part of the old boys' network, even if their tenure inside the threshold is frustratingly brief.

One shouldn't trivialize the trauma that many writers are experiencing. Rejection hurts, and rejection after a period of apparent success hurts even more. Here you are, with a few published novels under your belt; you're thinking about future projects, new directions you might move in, new challenges you might undertake; and you're suddenly told that you have officially been branded Box Office Poison and you'll never publish another novel as long as you live. That's depressing news, it's happened to talented friends of mine, and it's more than a darn shame; it's a special sort of all-encompassing, aching pain, a sense that someone has irrevocably lost something precious, the feeling powerfully conveyed by a tearful Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*: "I coulda been a contender."

Yet there are consolations to be had for washed-up science fiction novelists. With a reputation of sorts, you can still publish stories in magazines and anthologies; you can submit books to small presses; you can swallow your pride and accept assignments to write *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* books or Young Adult novels; you can try relaunching your career in another genre or under a pseudonym. Even if such prospects are unpalatable and unworkable, you still live with the knowledge that your books remain on the shelves of thousands of libraries and personal collections, that they are forever enshrined in Bill Contento's meticulous bibliographies. For the rest of your life, you can attend science fiction conventions, serve on panels, enjoy being in the spotlight again, and talk to people who remember your work – "Oh yeah, you wrote the *Star-Rat* novels."

I also think it inappropriate to draw too much public attention to the sufferings of writers. People want the clown to make them laugh; they don't want to hear about the clown's personal problems. People want science fiction writers to entertain and inspire them, not to demand their sympathy. Barry N. Malzberg once published a novel, *Herovit's World*, about how miserable it was to be a science fiction writer, and while I personally think it was his best novel – sparkling, hilarious, and deeply unsettling – it did not seem to do much for his career.

I bring this topic up in *Interzone* only because it may be relevant to another complaint about science fiction more directly important to readers.

Science fiction, this other lament *S*goes, was once an uplifting, forward-looking literature that expressed a strong belief in the power of individuals to shape and control their futures, a confidence that humanity could eventually overcome its problems and achieve a glorious destiny in the stars. It was a literature of expansive energy and boundless possibilities. Today, however, science fiction has largely lost these desirable qualities; its most admired and most discussed stories seem cramped and gloomy, pessimistic fables of helpless people crushed by oppressive conditions or barely surviving, with happiness to be found only in revisiting or contemplating past glories. Judith Berman's "Science Fiction without the Future" (*The New York Review of Science Fiction* #153, May 2001) offered an unusually well-documented discussion of how frequently contemporary science fiction stories are grounded in nostalgia for the past rather than hopes for the future, but charges that science fiction somehow isn't what it used to be have a long history, dating back – interestingly – at least to the 1960s, the same time when writers started bemoaning the sorry states of their career.

Allow me to advance a general, explanatory hypothesis: that the evolving essence, the *zeitgeist*, of any form of literature will always be directly related to its economic and social status at the time. If yesterday's spy thrillers have grown into today's grander, global technothrillers, that is because the field has garnered more respect and increasing sales; if contemporary poetry seems anaemic, insular and self-involved, that is because its audience and market share have precipitously dwindled. In the case of science fiction, prior to the 1960s, writers could accurately see themselves as boats in a rising tide, contributors to a field of literature

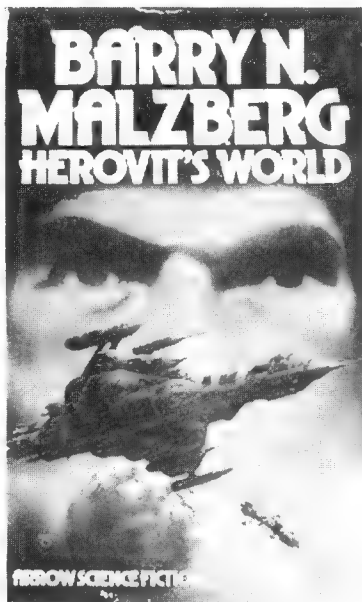
constantly expanding in terms of income and influence, attracting more and more dedicated readers. Payment rates kept climbing, new markets (the slicks, hardcover and paperback books, films, television, comic books) kept opening up, everything seemed to be getting better and better. In such a milieu, it was only natural to write science fiction stories about confident, capable heroes creating marvellous new inventions, improving society, and conquering the universe; in a real sense, such narratives were metaphors for what the field of science fiction itself was accomplishing.

By the 1960s, however, the Big Crunch had begun: the magazine market dramatically and permanently shrank, book publishers reduced production, and film, television and comics were becoming closed shops uninterested in recruiting print authors. For the first time, many writers and editors found themselves making less money instead of more money. And what happened next? The cynical, downbeat New Wave, uncoincidentally championed by a magazine perpetually on the verge of economic extinction. Since that era, while the science fiction market did start expanding again and generating more income, most of the money wasn't going into the pockets of writers, as a fortunate wealthy few were far outnumbered by others of equal talent being driven out of the game or forced into serfdom.

And that must have an impact on the stories being written. When you're a science fiction writer struggling to survive on an unexpectedly miserly advance who has just heard that the production run of your next novel has been slashed, probably guaranteeing lousy sales and a decision to cancel the rest of your four-book contract, it's hard to come up with boundlessly optimistic sagas of triumphant humanity in a technologically advanced future. Rather, as you feel yourself being shoved out of publishing your own major novels into less lucrative netherworlds of shared-world anthologies, small presses, and franchised-universe products, you are much more likely to produce depressing tales of poor schnooks destroyed by the system or nostalgic fantasies focused on the Good Old Days.

So, for those seeking the sorts of youthfully energetic and heartening stories that once characterized science fiction, the only advice may be to start playing video and computer games, where such narrative qualities are to be found in excess. After all, the creators of these games, unlike today's science fiction writers, are infused with the comforting knowledge that they are part of a field with a glorious future.

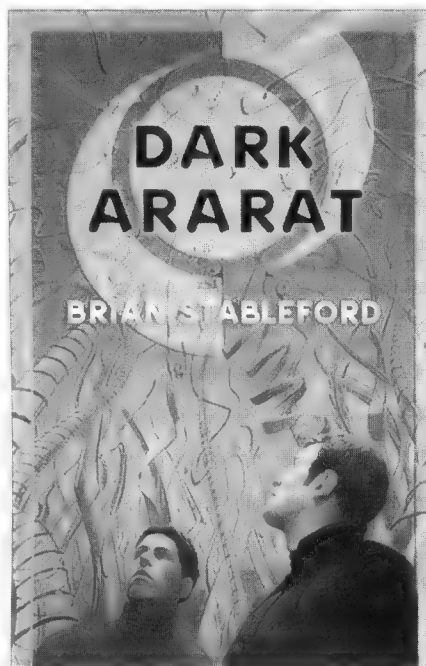
Gary Westfahl





REVIEWED

In Brian Stableford's *Dark Ararat* (Tor, \$25.95) Matthew Fleury, former eco-prophet and TV pundit of Earth and currently a passenger on a multi-generation starship, wakes to find himself in orbit around the new colony world of Ararat. He has been defrosted in order to replace his old friend Bernal Delgado, who has been murdered down on the surface. Matthew runs into trouble almost immediately, caught in a shipboard revolution against the ship's owner, and incurring the wrath of the captain. Despite these difficulties, Matthew and defrosted detective Vince Solari make it down to Ararat's surface in order to find out which of the remaining seven remaining scientists on the planet is the murderer – assuming the guilty party is



## Sweet Reasonableness vs. Nasty Lifeforms

Liz Williams

even a colleague of Delgado, and not one of the suspected humanoid indigenouses of Ararat itself.

Meanwhile, news trickling across the void from Earth reveals the home world to be a planet as alien as the one beneath the starship: humans have conquered plague, attained "emortality," and effectively evolved into something that is no longer quite the same species. Matthew and the colonists, therefore, are an atavistic protrusion into a literally evolved universe.

Down on the planet, Matthew finds a disturbed and divided group of scientists, and a very intriguing ecosystem. He is thus faced with two puzzles: who committed the murder, and how the very planet around him functions.

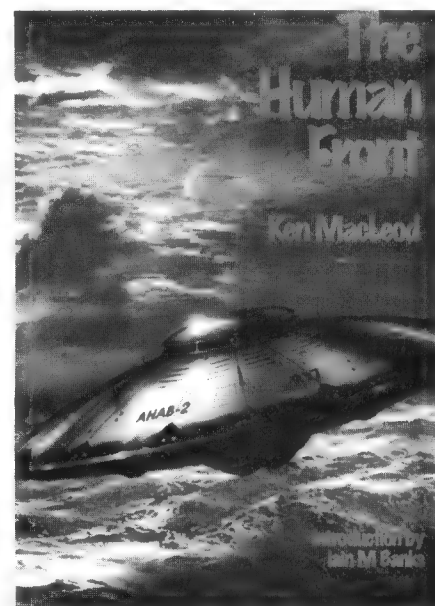
Of these two mysteries, the latter is by far the most intriguing. This is hard science fiction at its best: cerebral, reflective, informative without being overwhelming. At first I thought I might have to hand the novel over to someone who has a degree in molecular biology, but Stableford serves up his meditations on evolutionary theory and a radically different form of development with confidence and aplomb and I feel considerably more informed about his chosen theme than I did when I started this book. The biological sciences have been somewhat neglected of late in sf and it's good to see a writer returning to this particular area of hard science, particularly since Stableford's ideas about chimerical evolution are so interesting.

The murder mystery itself is less engaging. Although clearly introduced in order to drive the plot forward, the author's interest in who (or what) dunnit seems to alternatively flag and become revived, depending on the exigencies of the narrative. The other

characters' effective lack of interest in the outcome lessens our own concern. Sure, they care about their dead colleague, but the need to sustain their little community by pulling together over an abyss of denial makes them less sympathetic. Everyone is entirely too reasonable, except when they give way to sudden (and rather baffling) outbreaks of violence. Their attitude is explained plausibly enough, but I'm afraid that I didn't buy it and since this is also a novel that is concerned with social mores over long time-periods, the need for a coherent ethos on the part of the colonizing scientists is critical. As it is, the defrosted scientists are constantly referred to as "barbarians," but their sweet reasonableness is in direct contrast to the whacked-out revolutionaries aboard the ship. If Stableford is trying to make a more subtle set of points here, I missed them.

The other problem for me was that the planet itself – despite boasting some extremely nasty lifeforms – managed to feel almost devoid of threat. It's as though the author fears that genuine emotion on the part of his reader will distract from their understanding of the complex scientific ideas in the text. Although the "hostile alien world" is a bit of a cliché, it still has a lot of mileage left in it, and I would have liked to have seen that highlighted, given that Ararat's ecosystem is based on such different biological priorities. As a former philosopher of science, I also have a slight issue with Stableford's take on the concept of *verstehen*, but that's a minor problem. Apart from these quibbles, this is a thought-provoking novel and a very good read.

The lead character in *The Home Front* by Ken MacLeod (PS Publishing, £25 hb, £8 pb), John Mathe-son, is the son of the local doctor on the island of Lewis, in a late-20th-cen-





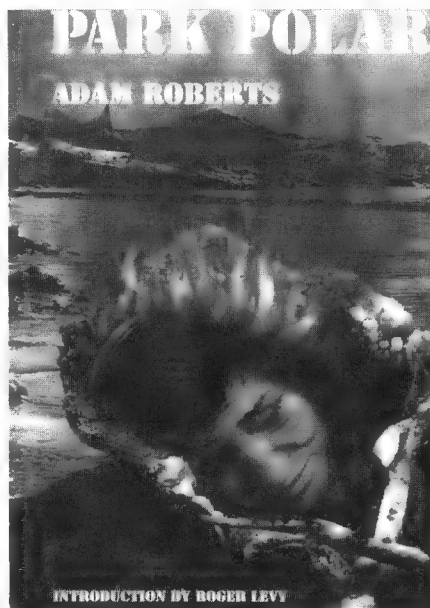
tury Scotland that is at once very like, and very unlike, our own. In this version of Earth – war-racked, dominated by a still-Communist Russia – life is far more unsettled and unsettling than our own world, as John discovers when an American military aircraft crashlands on the island. His father is called in to treat the pilot, and John is startled to find that the Americans are using children to fly their new engines of destruction.

In this shifting alternative Earth, however, nothing is quite as it seems. The pilot may not be a child after all, and the aircraft may not be American. John, growing up to become a hardened guerrilla, begins to learn that the world as he thinks he knows it, with all the arrogant certainty of youth, is a set of intricate political illusions: as deeply nested as a Russian doll.

MacLeod really does manage to have his cake and eat it in this assured, intriguing novella. I'm reluctant to say more, as this is a narrative that is heavily dependent on twists and turns of plot. Suffice to say that MacLeod returns to some hoary old themes with a very fresh eye – I can't remember when I last read a piece of this length that had so many ideas crammed into it. It's a testament to MacLeod's writing that he just about manages to carry this off. I was reluctant to go along with the latter stages of the plot of *The Home Front* as it is, basically, outrageous, but I have great admiration for the way that he leads his readers up this particular set of alternative garden paths. I also found the political backdrop compelling. (Readers who dislike alternative universes should probably stay away, but I'm a fan of alternate histories, particularly ones like MacLeod's that demonstrate the terrible contingency of the historical process with economy and conviction.)

If I have a criticism, it's that the narrative feels somewhat top-heavy: there's an immense wealth of detail about John's early years, and the later part of the novella comes in a bit of a rush. If this is a setting and a set of themes to which MacLeod returns in other, longer, novels, then I will definitely be seeking them out.

Adam Roberts's *Park Polar* (PS Publishing, £25 hb, £8 pb) is set in a future world dominated by the machinations of large companies. Genetic engineering specialist McCullough flies in to a polar research station over an Antarctic that is substantially altered from the white wilderness we know today. It is now a land dominated by beds of algae, over which herds of mild white wildebeest browse, hunted by the occasional lioness. McCullough is coming to Antarctica to introduce her own speciality, snow kangaroos, but what she finds at the research station is a



situation far more dangerous than that presented by any genetically modified animal.

At first, the station seems relatively calm. McCullough meets her colleagues: three bickering scientists in addition to the station manager (and bearded lady) Natty. Also present are three young soldiers placed there by the presiding Company in order to protect the project from the possible threat of ecoterrorists, who object to the practice of using Earth's last unspoiled land-mass for economic development. But when the soldiers are mysteriously killed, McCullough is faced with a network of shifting loyalties and allegiances that she fails to understand.

The novella is based around an interesting setting (including the backdrop of a corporate world as cold and merciless as the Antarctic itself) and a gripping mystery, and on the whole, it works very well. Roberts's characters are competently and economically drawn, though unsympathetic. McCullough tends to suffer from fits of hysterics that don't quite accord with her presented history as a research scientist, and which seem to have been introduced purely in order to serve the plot. (To be fair, having once learned from a writer-in-residence at a real-life Antarctic research station that she and her colleagues had installed a home made "madometer" on the wall so that other people could see how crazy they thought they were getting, McCullough's jitters and the other scientists' unsociability are perhaps understandable.) The final revelation about the murders come as a genuine surprise, though there is too much of an information overload in the final pages and I felt this could have been handled with greater delicacy.

The ultimate unravelling of the mystery reveals a set of preoccupations that are becoming alarmingly familiar to us today: corporate takeovers, ecoterrorism and protest, accompanied by a mass burial of scientific heads in the sand in response to economic pressures. Roberts is to be complimented for highlighting these issues in this welcome return to the kind of sf that contains a gripping story as well as the exploration of scientific and political questions.

Liz Williams

## Stepping Outside

Nigel Brown

It was on 16th July 1945 in New Mexico when fear of the destruction of the world moved from an unfulfilled religious vision of apocalypse into the realm of scientific possibility. Some scientists working on the Manhattan Project considered the risk that detonating this first nuclear bomb would ignite the Earth's atmosphere, burning us all to a crisp. Today, we hear similar alarms expressed when ever more powerful particle accelerators attempt to create exotic forms of matter – strange substances that could convert the whole of the Earth into their form, destroying us all in the process. All good sf writers know how to extrapolate, and the concept of the runaway conversion has been around for a while – two of the

best known examples are Kurt Vonnegut's "Ice-Nine" in *Cat's Cradle* (1963) and the crystallization of space and time in J.G. Ballard's *The Crystal World* (1966).

Now Greg Egan turns his attention to this sub-genre in *Schild's Ladder* (Gollancz, £10.99). Being Egan, of course, he takes the concept a few steps beyond a metastasis of matter or even energy, and postulates a transformation in the nature of space/time itself. Taking the idea of a benign experiment gone wrong, the story relates how a new form of the space/time vacuum erupts uncontrollably from a tiny speck, then proceeds to expand at half the speed of light across the galaxy. This catastrophe

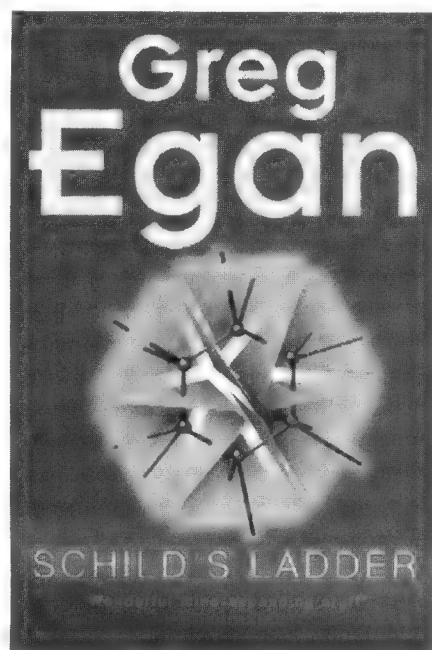
takes place in our far future, and thousands of inhabited star systems are consumed by the *novo-vacuum*; the boundary between our Universe and the *Other* sweeps through our galaxy, threatening the whole of humanity – no one dares to penetrate it. The entire destruction of the known Universe looks inevitable.

The stakes are rarely as high as this. It would be absurd to set this disaster in our time, for the Earth would be destroyed in an instant – and that would make a short novel. As Peter F. Hamilton wisely does in his “Night’s Dawn” trilogy (1996-1999), Egan balances this threat with a human race equipped with a technology far in advance of ours – 20,000 years of further progress – so it’s credible that they can at least investigate this disaster, and hope to do something about it.

The bulk of the novel is set on a craft moving at half light-speed just ahead of the transforming front of the *novo-vacuum*. Various characters are on board to study the phenomenon: Egan focuses on the relationship between two who represent different schools of thought on how to tackle it – Tchicaya wants humanity to yield to the boundary, and accept a transformation of space/time... a new invigoration for a static, jaded human species at the apotheosis of its evolution. His childhood friend Mariama takes the opposite view. She wants to destroy this new Universe before it consumes all.

Egan doesn’t let us down in the end. There’s no cop-out. He faces the challenge of describing a different space/time and displays an authority of scientific imagination that the reader can trust. Rather as Stephen Baxter achieved in his novel *Flux* (1993), Egan’s characters travel to the heart of the fantastic: they step outside the familiar frames of reference, and take the reader with them.

And yet, on an emotional level, the people in this novel are curiously uninvolved. That’s not down to any lack of skill in describing human beings, but an inherent problem with fiction set 20,000 years into our future. It’s a useful device in sf when a character from our time travels to a distant epoch, thus carrying the reader’s contemporary reactions and “eyes” as essential baggage needed to interpret a distant future. Larry Niven did this successfully in *A World Out of Time* (1977). Egan has taken insufficient account of our present-day prejudices, and submerges us directly into a world where the fear of death is almost nonexistent due to “backing-up” of personalities, and characters change sex as we change gloves. This makes it hard to identify with their concerns, and shifts the novel’s arena of conflict more purely into the realm of philosophical discussion than it



need be. The result is interesting – but not on the gut-level.

Yet here, Egan moves into his *forte*. One of his best short stories of recent years, “Wang’s Carpets” (in *New Legends*, 1995), relates how humanity is looking for alien life and alien intelligence, and finds it in an unexpected location, forcing a re-evaluation of humanity’s view of its place in the Universe. *Schild’s Ladder* returns to this theme, and that is where the strength of the book lies. The “Ladder” in question is a mathematical technique, but in this novel it’s a metaphor for the comfort an individual can find within their community in times of radical change.

To finish this book is to be satisfied

that Egan has, himself, explored the consequences of the situation he’s set up. If I have a complaint, it is that this is done at a somewhat parochial level. The novel’s scope shrinks as the narrative progresses. We start with a character travelling 370 light-years, we’re treated to a map of inhabited star systems hundreds of light-years across, but we’re denied a thrilling sense of galactic catastrophe – the space opera of a galaxy-wide civilization coping with mass evacuation and panic that Peter Hamilton achieved so well in his “Night’s Dawn” trilogy. I would accept that perhaps this wasn’t what Egan had set out to do, but dramatic opportunities are lost when too many interesting events happen off-stage – I felt slightly cheated.

That point aside, this novel is faultless as a story at the cutting-edge of hard sf. As if to underline this, Egan supplies a comprehensive list of references at the back of the book, including his website address where he’s put up supplementary material. That was the real eye-opener: a treat for those who want info-dumping about the exotic physics that frames *Schild’s Ladder*. Egan has taken the time to write a series of short diagrammed essays which make for a tasty dessert after the main dish. Is this also cutting-edge? A pointer to the way hard sf is going? Or is it merely a collection of value-added items similar to the add-ons to movie DVDs and the like?

Time will tell. But whatever else, *Schild’s Ladder* serves as a gateway into this fascinating area of speculative physics. That, by itself, should be recommendation enough.

Nigel Brown

## Doctor Ho-Hum and the Scribes of Metafiction 3

Paul Beardsley

**The Adventuress of Henrietta Street** by Lawrence Miles is mostly set in London in 1782, and sees the Eighth Doctor Who running a brothel. It is a long novel and it is written in the style of a history textbook. It is demanding, and rewarding for the most part. The historical insights are utterly fascinating, and some of the fantastic imagery is very powerful indeed. However, there were many occasions when I found myself wishing I was reading a “pure” history book by, say, Dr David Starkey and/or a straightforward adventure story

with minimal exposition.

*Adventuress* explores the consequences of some of the radical developments in the “Doctor Who” book range. Gallifrey, the Time Lord planet, has been destroyed, leaving the universe at the mercy of outside forces. Here, these take the form of baboons (or babewyns), symbols of our bestial selves which in turn have to be fought with symbolic acts, the Doctor’s wedding ceremony being one such act. In the course of the book we meet the time-traveller Sabbath, a returning character who may or may not be a

villain, and the Doctor undergoes major surgery of a surprising nature which leaves him somewhat less of a Time Lord.

No prizes for guessing that Paul Magrs's *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* features Noel Coward; he wields a pair of pinking shears which cut through the Very Fabric of Time and Space, rather in the manner of Philip Pullman's subtle knife. Several other 20th-century figures appear in somewhat disguised form, notably Reginald Tyler (a.k.a. J.R.R. Tolkien). It seems that Tyler's seminal work has undergone a transformation: instead of being about elves, dwarves and so on, it is now about pink poodles.

The trouble with most "humorous" Doctor Who books is that they tend to rely on a single funny idea that isn't actually all that funny. *Mad Dogs* does have its moments, but for the most part it reads like a poor imitation of a Douglas Adams *Hitch-Hiker* book. Worse, Magrs comes across as one of those resentful literary types who can't understand why *The Lord of the Rings* is so popular.

Mark Clapham's *Hope* is set on Endpoint, a heavily polluted distant planet in the far future. The Doctor has lost the TARDIS and is compelled to do a deal with a shady cyborg called Silver in order to get it back. Author Clapham appears to have drawn his inspiration mainly from comics and films – including some very bad films. The setting is poorly realized, due in part to the prose which is wordy and vague. Characters behave idiotically, especially companion Anji. In an emotionally trite subplot, she betrays the Doctor to Silver in exchange for a clone of her dead boyfriend Dave – despite the fact that she realizes the clone will not have Dave's memories,

will not in fact be Dave.

Like most Doctor Who novels, Jonathan Morris's *Anachrophobia* is at least 100 pages too long. The characters tend to be unsympathetic and indistinguishable from each other. A pity, because otherwise the book is dazzling. It is set in a wintry forest on a world that appears to be a distorted reflection of Earth. A war is raging there, fought with time weapons. The effects of these weapons are initially predictable, not to say hackneyed, but read on – persistence is rewarded.

I'm often irritated by "Who" authors' disregard for logic, but the absurdities in *Anachrophobia* are mostly deliberate, and used to good effect. The cover illo, which shows a bowler-hatted man with a blood-spattered clock where his face should be, provides a taster of things to come. Recommended for anyone who likes Dali but prefers Magritte.

Another irritating thing "Who" authors tend to do is to have their characters openly acknowledge the conventions and restrictions of the range. Said characters are generally grinning as they do this, reflecting the authors' smug belief that they are being terribly original and amusing. Which they are not.

In Lance Parkin's *Trading Futures*, Anji blithely causes the Doctor to be defenestrated from an office block, knowing he's bound to survive the fall because, well, he's due to appear in the next book, isn't he? (Smug grin.) Apart from this serious blemish, and some minor lapses in the plotting, *Trading Futures* is thoroughly enjoyable. Written as a James Bond spoof, it is set in a well-thought-out near future, and although it's yet another (mostly) Earth-bound adventure it does at least move beyond the

British Isles – the most interesting bits being set in Athens. The world is threatened once again, this time by the Onihrs, a rhino-like bunch of aliens who are so incompetent that you can't help feeling sorry for them.

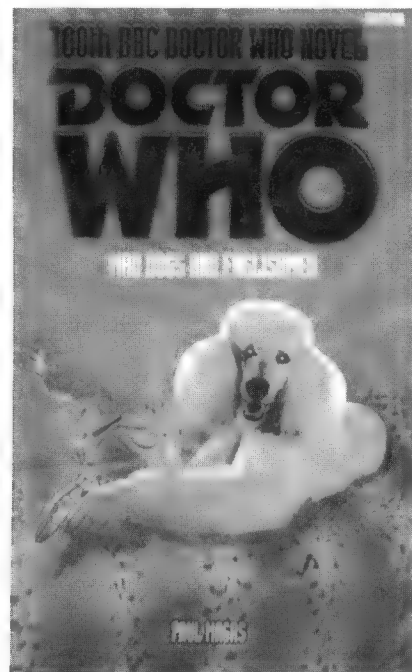
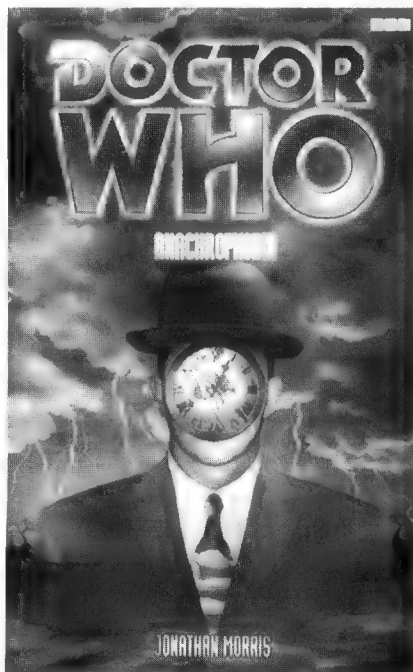
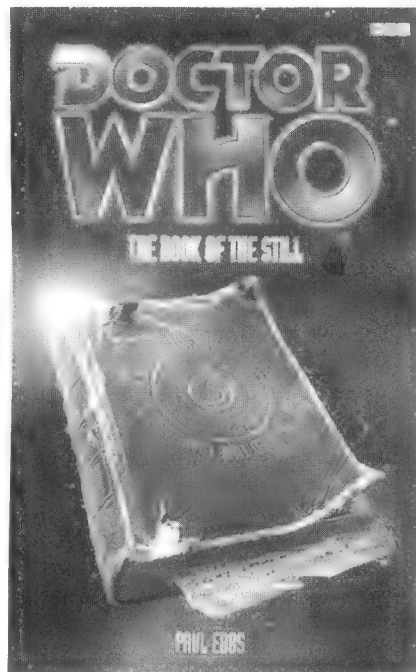
*Trading Futures* is one of the few humorous Who books that doesn't attempt to milk a single feeble conceit for 250 pages. The jokes in this book arise naturally from the situation; they come thick and fast, and some of them are very, very funny.

The BBC recently announced that they will be cutting their Who books output from 22 a year to 12 a year. Given the standard of some of the books – notably Paul Ebbs's *The Book of the Still* – this is undoubtedly a smart move. Ebbs seems so bowled over by his own imagined cleverness that he's forgotten how to tell a story, if he ever knew. A quarter of the way through I still had no clue as to what the main characters were trying to achieve. After 70-odd pages of puerile prose ("Ugh! Underpants! I just touched his Chuddies!! Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!") and cod-postmodernism ("Chapter One: Obligatory Spectacular Opening") I gave up.

My main concern with this latest batch of Eighth Doctor adventures is that there's no sense of an ongoing story. Authors obligingly insert token references to Sabbath, the Doctor's operation and so on, but these serve only to highlight the lack of shared vision.

(All the above are £5.99 from BBC Worldwide Ltd.)

A couple of past Doctors feature in a pair of novellas from Telos Publishing Ltd ([www.telos.co.uk](http://www.telos.co.uk)). First up is *Citadel of Dreams* by Dave Stone, set on a planet where time gets mixed



up because it is closer to the singularity at the galactic centre. This is of course complete bollocks, but I was prepared to suspend my disbelief just so long as Stone made good use of the idea.

In fact Stone makes no real use of the idea. Instead he inflicts prose on us, flowery prose, self-qualifying prose, the kind of cod-literary prose that newbie authors employ when they don't have a story to tell but they want you to think there are hidden depths of meaning in their writing, if only you were perceptive enough to see it. The occasional flashes of vivid-

ness highlight the fact that this is a wasted opportunity – but then, plotting a coherent story is hard work.

Like Paul Magrs, Tom Arden is an established author outside the world of Doctor Who – besides the “Orokon” series of fantasy novels for Gollancz he has written *Shadow Black* for Big Engine. His *Nightdreamers* sees Jon Pertwee's Doctor and Katy Manning's Jo Grant land on a forested moon called Verd. Much of the story is told in the manner of a fairy tale, and this works very well for the most part, although the borrowings from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are somewhat overdone.

In a book that's even shorter than an old Target paperback novelization, Tom Arden gives us a complete adventure; there's action, mystery, romance and an exotic new world. As was often the case with Target novelizations the book is more involving than the TV series tended to be. This is how I always wanted written Doctor Who to be: short and sweet, unpretentious and fun.

(Both these books are available in hardback, £25 for the deluxe edition, £10 for the standard edition.)

**Paul Beardsley**

**C**harles de Lint's *The Onion Girl* (Tor, \$27.95; Gollancz, £16.99 hc, £9.99 pb) is the latest novel to be set in Newford, his ever-expanding urban-fantasy venue. Jilly Coppercorn has been on the edge of 5Newford society, gleefully binding her friends together, a perpetually happy busybody cheering others up. She is hospitalized after being knocked down by a car and her friends find themselves having to help her. As she heals physically, she crosses over to the Dreamlands where she has to face up to the truth behind her perpetual smile — that she is the Onion Girl, made up of layers which hide an empty core. After she meets up with friends, she begins a journey of self-healing.

Meanwhile in a small, redneck town, Raylene finally escapes from familial abuse with her friend, Pinky. They survive by embarking on a spree of stealing and soft-core pornography before they come to Newford, as Raylene realizes that her older sister is living there. She discovers a way across the divide into the Dreamlands

## Family, Friends and Other Journeys

*Iain Emsley*

ney and increase in their own strength, they find that the gap between the mundane and the dreaming grows thinner. Although they begin to cross over via their own dreams, they soon find other portals in the real world that may be used as they attune themselves to the worlds.

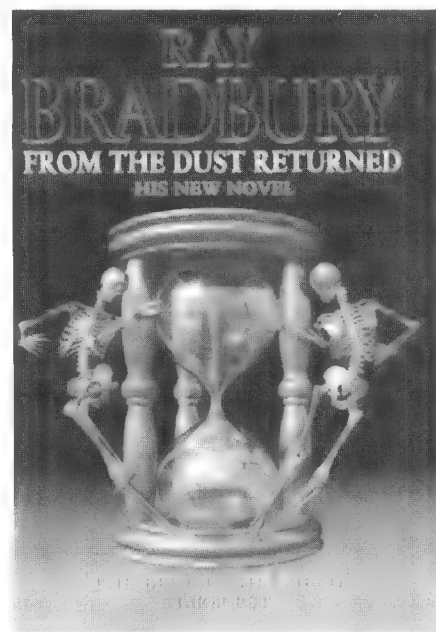
De Lint paints a wonderful set of characters, each with his or her own hurts but also with a sense of catharsis, so that they can tell the difference between moving on and running away. He creates the darker, more complete side of Jilly, one which has remained hidden for a long time, and gives us her family history. He is an optimist and shows his faith in people's ability to remain largely intact. The writing is as lyrical as ever, maintaining a balance between the two main plotlines. This is perhaps one of de Lint's most deeply felt books for a while, and as such is one to be savoured.

**A**lthough packaged as a new novel, Ray Bradbury's *From the Dust Returned: A Family Remembrance* (Earthlight, £16.99) is a mosaic of short stories, variously written between 1945 and 1952 and in the late 1980s, all

and refashions herself and Pinky into wolves hunting after the unicorns.

As Jilly peels away the accreted layers of her past, she begins to focus upon the concept of family and how she has created her own social family. Having lived on the streets, she has built her own family of friends who have supported her, but when Raylene comes to find her she has to face up to the consequences of her actions — much as Raylene has to do after Pinky dies. De Lint moves away from what caused the sisters to run away from home and focuses on how they refashion themselves, both physically and mentally, moving on from the sense of being Broken Girls at a far more basic level. Both enjoy their individual transformations and approach their own epiphanies before actually moving on, rather than running away.

As the women continue their jour-





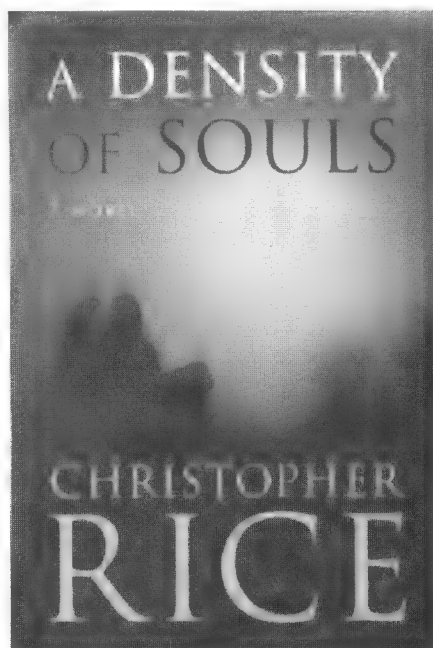
linked together with new material. In an attic, the Thousand Times Great Grandmère awaits the homecoming of the Family — a misfit arrangement of all the things that come out at Halloween. Her voice susurrates through the novel, linking each of the stories as the clan gathers, introducing us to the Family merely enjoying family life. However, they also come to realize that they are still fighting the eternal war against organized religion, that even though they are the flip side of belief, the Family must disperse into the corners of everyday life.

Bradbury argues that the fantastic is an integral part of everyday life. When Uncle Einar volunteers to be the first to leave the house, he is injured in a storm and loses his night vision. His children persuade him to go kite-flying with them and he soon learns to be the envy of the other children who see him as a giant kite. The Thousand Times Great Grandmère is donated to a museum after they undertake to listen to her; thus she can carry on telling the world of the Family, as if she is a mobile Book of the Dead.

In true weird-tales fashion, there is a question as to whether the Family are really what they claim to be. Although they are framed as supernatural, Bradbury places them in very ordinary situations. In his afterword, he mentions that the genesis of the book was his immediate family and their gatherings as he was growing up. Reminiscences and meetings, narrative and settings are approached obliquely, refashioned with a sense of wonder and mischief. Rather than trying to give the occasional false sense of difference, Bradbury focuses upon the familiar details, rendering them unfamiliar but, conversely, making the unfamiliar, familiar.

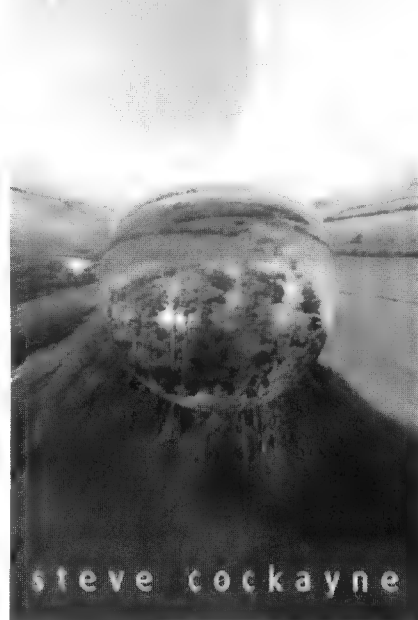
Bradbury places himself within the Gothic genre but manages to revitalize it in his own unique fashion. He evokes the traditional Gothic through allusions to Poe and to parts of the Family coming from Europe and Egypt, but also utilizes a pulp sensibility to really propel the reader forward. In addition, some delightful Charles Addams drawings have been interspersed through the text (as originally planned for this book in the late 1940s), adding to the sense of Gothic playfulness, lifting the novel away from one Gothic mode and placing it into another, more contemporary one.

*From the Dust Returned* delivers a musky, dry atmosphere tempered with cartoonish graveyard humour, denoting the October Country which it seeks to call its own. There is unevenness to the pacing due to the nature of its structure, but this is certainly a book to be delved into and savoured.



Christopher Rice, Anne's son, is the latest of his family to go into writing. His debut novel, *A Density of Souls* (Macmillan, £6.99), is written in the modern fashion of the Southern Gothic. Like his mother in her first book, Rice creates a feeling of lush romanticism in the environs of New Orleans. His territory is firmly mapped in the suburbs, that twilight zone so beloved of those fishing to expose the darker side of urban life. Each family has their own fiction, their own way of rationalizing the world around them and maintaining their society. Occasionally the façade cracks, it must be noted in a slightly stereotypical fashion, but it is largely maintained. However this noisy silence is broken after two fatal accidents in the bastions of their society —

wanderers and islanders



a hard tackle upon the sports field followed by a shooting in the church bell tower. As each person rebuilds their lives, they rewrap the fiction surrounding them until that other great demon of American society is unleashed: the intolerance of white supremacy. After a series of attacks in the gay district, three of the school friends reunite and begin to discuss that evening, unravelling their own facts.

Rather than being a novel of growing up, *A Density of Souls* is more a coming to terms with where each character has come from, the roots of their actions or personality. As each fiction is explored, the seeming innocence of school-time cruelties becomes more sinister. There is a strong sense of guilt which manifests itself in the group as Rice steadily ups the ante with the supernatural. This is a well-paced debut novel that gradually reveals its richness.

**Wanderers and Islanders: Legwends of the Land, Book One** by new writer Steve Cockayne (Orbit, £10.99) is a very British oddity. Victor Lazarus is employed to manage a team restoring a house for its absent landlord. Rusty Brown is given a gift by a strange girl who comes to his school but disappears equally suddenly. Leonard Pegasus invents the Multiple Empathy Engine, designed to affect many futures, but is forced to leave his academic eyrie to wander the land outside the city. As Leonard and Rusty wander the land independently, they come across the myth of the Wanderers and the Islanders, ancient shamans and travellers who maintained the land in communion with a great spirit. As they move through their adventures, they revitalize these myths: Rusty through his mapping and Leonard through his Engine.

The landscape constantly shifts, disorientating the reader, hinting at multiple time-lines which interweave through the novel. There is a hint that the reader is being manipulated throughout the book as Rusty and Leonard begin to consciously manipulate the narrative. In many ways, one is reminded of a puppet theatre, and the boundary between the reader and the narrative becomes less clearly defined. Out of this, there comes a real sense of creation and potential for subsequent volumes.

*Wanderers and Islanders* is a novel that creates its own mythology and marvels, with its own technology. In places it is confusing, but one suspects that Cockayne will provide satisfactory solutions to the questions he raises. Its bravura rests upon an odd mixture of styles, but Cockayne comes through as a strong writer. He's one to read.

Iain Emsley

# BOOKS RECEIVED



APRIL  
2002

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

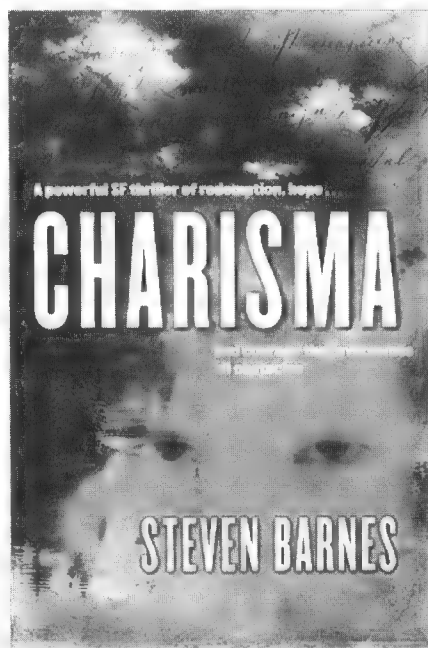
Abbey, Lynn. **Sanctuary: An Epic Novel of Thieves' World.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87491-X, 480pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a new, belated entry in a long-established shared-world series, it's described in this proof's blurb as "part sword and sorcery, part Micheneresque fantasy epic of a city's history.") *June 2002.*

Abnett, Dan. **The Guns of Tanith.** "Warhammer 40,000. A Gaunt's Ghosts Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-232-6, 315pp, A-format paperback, cover by Adrian Smith, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; this is the fifth "Gaunt's Ghosts" title by Abnett in the "Warhammer 40K" series; the author is a comics writer who resides in Maidstone, Kent, and has become a mainstay of GW's fiction factory – although not quite as prolific as William King [see below].) *April 2002.*

Aldiss, Brian. **The Cretan Teat.** House of Stratus [Thirsk Industrial Park, York Rd., Thirsk, N. Yorks. YO7 3BX], ISBN 0-7551-1147-8, 206pp, hardcover, cover by Konstantina Koulouli, £9.99. (Humorous

mainstream novel by a well-known British sf writer, first edition; proof copy received; set in Crete, and featuring a Greek icon, it's described as "Brian Aldiss' most ribald novel since *The Hand-Reared Boy*... a multi-layered story about history, blame, corruption, obsession, sex, the novelist and the delightful joys of growing old disgracefully"; it states "Copyright 2001" inside this proof, but it's clear from the accompanying publicity sheet that the book is a 2002 first publication; this is the first review copy we have been sent by the newly-revived House of Stratus, a print-on-demand publishing house concentrating mainly on crime fiction and the mainstream, which seemed to have collapsed some months ago; now operating from a new address in Yorkshire, they have obtained new funding and are continuing to issue many books; for ordering information, see their website: [www.houseofstratus.com](http://www.houseofstratus.com); they have 34 Brian Aldiss titles in print and have sent us a generous selection of them, all in handsome trade-paperback format, including *The Airs of Earth* [£6.99], *Barefoot in the Head* [£6.99], *Bury My Heart at W. H. Smith's* [£7.99] – the expanded text, previously only available in a limited edition from Avernus Creative Media [1990] –, *Cryptozoic!* [£6.99], *Dracula Unbound* [£6.99], *Frankenstein Unbound* [£6.99], *Greybeard* [£6.99], *Hothouse* [£6.99], *The Malacia Tapestry* [£6.99], *The Moment of Eclipse* [£6.99], *Moreau's Other Island* [£6.99], *The Saliva Tree* [£6.99] and *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* [with David Wingrove; £9.99; all recommended.] *May 2002.*

Aldiss, Brian. **Super-State: A Novel of a Future Europe.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-144-6, 230pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; the 76-year-old Mr Aldiss's second new novel in a month! – actually,



the two books are not as "simultaneous" as they appear to be; in a short afterword to the above novel, *The Cretan Teat*, Aldiss states that that book languished in a certain unhelpful publisher's office for over a year before he retrieved it and sold it to House of Stratus [who evidently intended to publish it in 2001, although it has slipped into 2002]; so it would seem that *Super-State* is indeed his latest novel, the most up-to-the-minute word from Brian Aldiss; it's described as being about "Europe 40 years from now... a place where technology advances ever onwards, where humanitarian concerns slip ever backwards and where the answers to the big questions remain as elusive as always"; it looks to be a timely read.) *2nd May 2002.*

Archer, Simon, and Marcus Hearn. **What Made Thunderbirds Go!: The Authorized Biography of Gerry Anderson.** BBC, 0-563-53481-8, 288pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Biography of a well-known sf TV-series producer; first edition; illustrated with 16 pages of photographs, it's blurred as "the definitive biography of the man behind *Stingray*, *Captain Scarlet* and the *Mysterons*, *UFO*, *Space Precinct*, and, not least, *Thunderbirds*"; Gerry Anderson was born Gerald Alexander Abrahams in London, 14th April 1929, and is still active; this is an unusual collaborative book, for it's described as "completely revised and updated by Marcus Hearn from the original authorized manuscript written by Simon Archer" – the latter died in a car crash in 1993.) *18th April 2002.*

Arden, Tom. **Nightdreamers.** Foreword by Katy Manning. Frontispiece by Martin McKenna. "Doctor Who Novellas." Telos Publishing [61 Elgar Ave., Tolworth, Surrey KT5 9JP], 1-903889-07-3, 107pp, hardcover, £25. (Sf TV-series spinoff novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous "standard edition" [hardcover] priced at £10 [not seen]; the limited "deluxe edition" which the publishers have sent as a review copy is signed by author, illustrator and foreword-writer; for ordering information see the publisher's website: [www.telos.co.uk](http://www.telos.co.uk); "Tom Arden" is a pseudonym of the Australian-born writer David Rain; this is the third in a series of new "Doctor Who" novellas; reviewed by Paul Beardsley in this issue of *Interzone*.) *15th May 2002.*

Audley, Anselm. **Heresy: Book One of The Aquasilva Trilogy.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7432-1484-5, 503pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; this is a Big Commercial Fantasy, set in "a storm-wracked waterworld," by – in the *Daily Mail's* words – "the teenage Tolkien.") *7th May 2002.*

Audley, Anselm. **Inquisition: Book Two of The Aquasilva Trilogy.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7432-0965-6, 400pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £10. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the second novel, following *Heresy* [2001], by a young, student-age British writer: "Anselm Audley is at St John's College, Oxford, reading Ancient and Modern History.") 7th May 2002.

Barnes, Steven. **Charisma.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87004-3, 380pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's about an experiment in child-rearing which turns sinister.) June 2002.

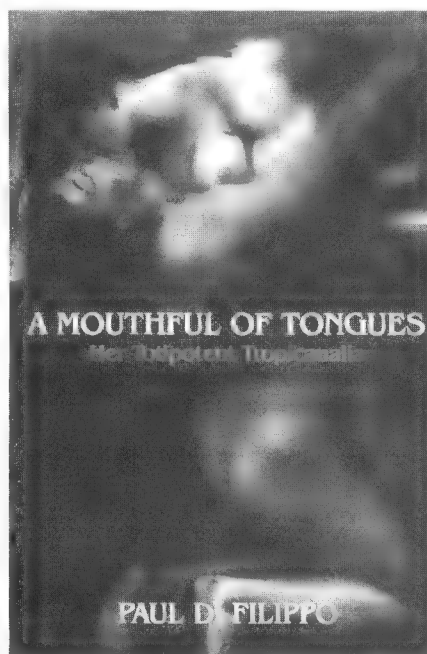
Bisson, Terry. **The Pickup Artist.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87421-9, 240pp, trade paperback, cover by David Gallo, \$13.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; the publishers describe it as "in the satirical tradition of Twain and Vonnegut... This is a book about love, death, and America"; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 170.) 22nd April 2002.

Brin, David. **Kil'n People.** "A future thriller." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-138-1, 503pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2002; it's about a private investigator in world of duplicate people.) 2nd May 2002.

Crowther, Peter, ed. **Infinites.** "The very best of British SF today." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07355-1, x+358pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition; a squarish hardcover [wider than it's tall], this collects four notable novellas which were published separately last year as slim books by Crowther's small-press imprint, PS Publishing: *A Writer's Life* by Eric Brown, *The Human Front* by Ken MacLeod, *Diamond Dogs* by Alastair Reynolds and *Park Polar* by Adam Roberts; this edition drops the original introductions, by various hands, and adds a new one by the editor, Peter Crowther.) 16th May 2002.

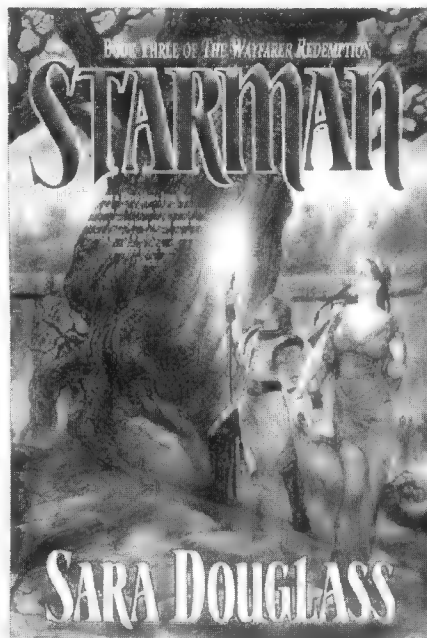
Dickson, Gordon R. **Dorsai Spirit.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87764-1, 430pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf omnibus, first edition; proof copy received; it contains the novel *Dorsai* [first published as *The Genetic General*, 1960; restored text 1976] and the collection of linked stories *The Spirit of Dorsai* [1979], two key works in the late Mr Dickson's unfinished "Childe Cycle" of future evolutionary adventures – "a pair of military SF classics every fan will want to own"; the volume has a short introduction by David Drake.) June 2002.

Di Filippo, Paul. **A Mouthful of Tongues: Her Totipotent Tropicandia.** Cosmos Books, ISBN 1-58715-506-0, 180pp, hardcover, cover by Franz von Stuck, \$29.95. (Erotic sf novel, first edition; the back-cover blurb states: "In his new novel, Paul Di Fil-



ippo, cult author of *Ciphers*, *The Steampunk Trilogy*, and *Ribofunk*, makes his boldest fictional statement yet... Writing in the tradition of Kathy Acker and Samuel R. Delany, but with a subversive brio all his own, Di Filippo here imagines a true erotic revolution, a crusade of the libido that will topple a corrupt and jaded future world order"; A. A. Attanasio, Kathe Koja and the aforementioned Samuel R. Delany all commend it; recommended to those who like their meat fairly strong; to order, see the publisher's website: [www.cosmos-books.com](http://www.cosmos-books.com); Cosmos Books is an imprint of Wildside Press, a US print-on-demand publisher which has now released many titles.) Early entry: "October 2002" publication, received in April 2002.

Douglass, Sara. **Starman: Book Three of The Wayfarer Redemption.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87888-5, 559pp, hardcover, cover by



Royo, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia as *Crusader*, 1997; third in this very successful Aussie author's second Big Commercial Fantasy trilogy, appearing some years late in America; note that it was first published in Australia, and in Britain [HarperCollins/Voyager, 2000], as *Crusader*, but that title has been changed for the first US edition – presumably this is an act of "censorship" provoked by the events of 11th September 2001.) 22nd May 2002.

Doyle, Debra, and James D. Macdonald. **A Working of Stars.** "The next novel in the sweeping Mageworlds series." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86411-6, 364pp, hardcover, cover by Romas, \$25.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; set in a universe where "the star systems of the Mages are linked by magic," it's described by Jane Yolen as "big, chewy space opera"; follow-up to *The Stars Asunder* [1999] and five earlier titles in the series which appeared as paperback originals.) 24th April 2002.

Ferring, David. **Warblade: Book 3 of the Konrad Trilogy.** "A Warhammer Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-233-4, 254pp, A-format paperback, cover by Karl Kopinski, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first published in the UK, 1993; "David Ferring" is a pseudonym of David Garnett.) April 2002.

Ford, John M. **The Dragon Waiting: A Masque of History.** "Fantasy Masterworks, 29." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07378-0, 365pp, B-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1983; a winner of the World Fantasy Award, it's set in the 15th century, and "brilliantly explores an alternative world in which Byzantium was not extinguished in 1453.") 9th May 2002.

Gentle, Mary. **Orthe: Chronicles of Carriek V.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07287-3, 980pp, B-format paperback, cover by John Howe, £9.99. (Sf/fantasy omnibus, first edition; it contains the novels *Golden Witchbreed* [1983] and *Ancient Light* [1987], and the linked short story "The Crystal Sunlight, the Bright Air" [*Asimov's SF Magazine*, 1983], plus appendices and maps, here all repackaged to resemble a fantasy epic rather than a planetary-romance sf series.) 11th April 2002.

Haber, Karen, ed. **Meditations on Middle-earth.** "New writing on the worlds of J. R. R. Tolkien." Illustrated by John Howe. Earthlight, ISBN 0-7432-3100-7, xvi+235pp, C-format paperback, cover by Howe, £10. (Essay anthology devoted to Tolkien's fantasy, first published in the USA, 2001; this is a packaged book from Byron Preiss Visual



Publications, Inc., illustrated throughout with black-and-white pencil drawings by Canadian artist and Tolkien specialist Howe; it contains newly-commissioned essays by the late Poul Anderson [the

book is dedicated to his memory], Orson Scott Card, Charles de Lint, Raymond E. Feist, Esther Friesner, "Robin Hobb," Lisa Goldstein, Ursula Le Guin, George R. R. Martin, Terry Pratchett, Michael Swanwick, Harry Turtledove, Terry Windling and others; one of the most solid and well-informed pieces is by Tolkien critic and editor Douglas A. Anderson; ironically, given Tolkien's extreme "Englishness," only Mr Pratchett flies the flag for the UK; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 175.) 7th May 2002.

Harrison, Harry. **A Stainless Steel Trio.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30277-2, 492pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Sf omnibus, first edition; proof copy received; it contains three of Harrison's popular "Slippery Jim diGriz" adventures: *A Stainless Steel Rat is Born* [1985], *The Stainless Steel Rat Gets Drafted* [1987] and *The Stainless Steel Rat Sings the Blues* [1994].) June 2002.

Hayden, Patrick Nielsen, ed. **Starlight 3.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86779-4, 350pp, trade paperback, cover by Edward Miller, \$15.95. (Sf/fantasy anthology, first published in the USA, 2001; all-new stories by Stephen Baxter, Terry Bisson, Ted Chiang [although not a prolific writer, he seems to be a fixture in this series], Susannah Clarke, Brenda W. Clough, D. G. Compton, Cory Doctorow, Andy Duncan, Colin Greenland, Maureen F. McHugh, Geoffrey A. Landis, Susan Palwick, Jane Yolen and others; reviewed by Matt Colborn in *Interzone* 175.) 9th May 2002.

Hearn, Marcus. **Star Wars, Episode II: Attack of the Clones: The Illustrated Companion.** "Behind the Scenes and Inside the Story of Episode II." Ebury Press, ISBN 0-091-88478-0, 144pp, large-format paperback, £14.99. (Copiously illustrated companion to the most recent [the fifth, despite being called "Episode II"] *Star Wars* space-opera movie produced and directed by George Lucas; first edition; "read all about how the film was made, the actors, the characters, locations, the art, and the costumes"; the author appears to be British, having previously written books about James Bond, Hammer Films, *Thunderbirds* and many of the usual "cult" suspects.) 23rd April 2002.

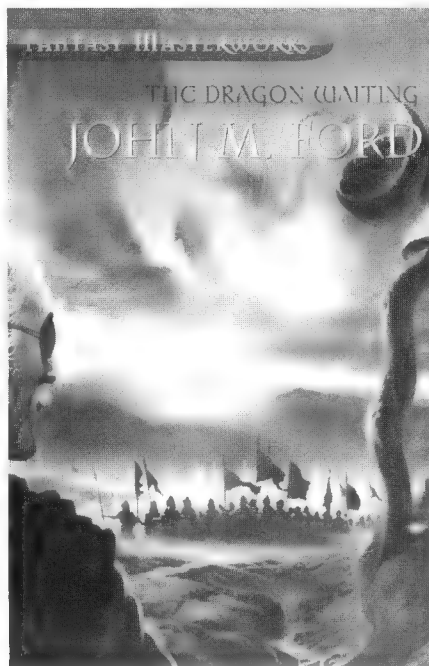
Herbert, James. **Once...** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30285-3, 382pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; first US edition of Herbert's "erotic tale of love, magic and horror.") 23rd April 2002.

Herbert, James. **Once...** Pan, ISBN 0-330-37613-6, 470pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001.) 11th May 2002.

Herter, David. **Evening's Empire.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87034-5, 352pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a second book by Herter, author of the sf novel *Ceres Storm* [2000], it's described as "a mysterious contemporary fantasy set on the Oregon coast, and in a world below it"; the blurb compares it to Gene Wolfe's *Peace*.) June 2002.

Jael. **Perceptualistics: Art by Jael.** Text by John Grant. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-971-8, 112pp, paperback, cover by Jael, £20. (Sf/fantasy art portfolio, first edition; a handsome large-format volume which represents a first [?] gathering of work by this American woman artist [born 1937] – "over the 45 years of her career her work has frequently featured in books, calendars, exhibitions and magazines"; her paintings range from swirly abstracts to rather twee cover paintings for Piers Anthony's books; we're not told her full name, but she was born in Salt Lake City and her mother was Myriel Ashton, "a composer of some distinction.") 24th May 2002.

Jeapes, Ben. **The Xenocide Mission.** David Fickling Books, ISBN 0-385-60412-2, 388pp, hardcover, £10.99. (Young-adult sf novel, first edition; Jeapes's third novel, following *His Majesty's Starship* and *Winged Chariot* [both of which were published by Scholastic], it's another solid-looking space adventure; "David Fickling Books" is an imprint of Random House Children's Books.) 2nd May 2002.



King, William. **Farseer.** "A Warhammer 40,000 Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-244-X, 287pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Dainton, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first edition; opening volume in a new "Eldar" trilogy of far-future extravagance by the Scottish writer [born 1959] who seems to have become GW's most prolific churner-out of the goods – author of six "Gotrek & Felix" Warhammer novels and three "Space Wolf" 40K novels.) May 2002.

Lau, Miller. **Dark Thane: Book Two of The Last Clansman.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-0401-7, 548pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Salwowski, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Miller Lau" is the pseudonym of a Scottish female writer; Book One of this trilogy, *Talisker*, appeared in 2001.) April 2002.

Le Guin, Ursula K. **Tales from Earthsea.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00932-8, xvii+314pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 2001; an elegant "Foreword," five sizeable stories, and an afterword in the form of "A Description of Earthsea"; she's the genuine article, is Le Guin: if there's such a thing as a Wise Woman for our time, she's it – this little, benign, grey-haired, old lady who smokes a pipe [she used to, anyway!] and dispenses her poetic insights from her witch-house in Portland, Oregon; reviewed by Nick Gevers in *Interzone* 169.) May 2002.

Matheson, Richard. **Hunted Past Reason.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30271-3, 335pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; proof copy received; it doesn't seem to contain any supernatural elements, but – like many of this veteran writer's earlier tales and screenplays – to be an exercise in psychological terror.) 10th July 2002.

Matthews, Andrew. **Moonchildren.** "Point Horror Unleashed." Scholastic, ISBN 0-439-99372-5, 150pp, A-format paperback, cover by Tim Edmonds, £4.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first edition.) May 2002.

Norton, Andre, and Lyn McConchie. **Beast Master's Ark.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30041-9, 318pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the sharecropping of all Norton's past sf and fantasy series proceeds apace; this is the first in a new series based on her novel *The Beast Master* [1959]; although billed as a collaboration, it's probably largely written by the junior partner, McConchie; veteran children's author Andre Norton [born Alice Mary Norton in 1912], whose first novel appeared in 1934, is getting to be very elderly.) June 2002.



Pelan, John, ed. **The Darker Side: Generations of Horror.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-45882-6, vii+386pp, A-format paperback, \$6.99. (Horror anthology, first edition; 27 all-original stories by Poppy Z. Brite, Simon Clark, Peter Crowther, Brian Hodge, Caitlin R. Kiernan, Joel Lane, the late Richard Laymon, Tim Lebbon, Tom Piccirilli, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, David B. Silva, Lucy Taylor, David Niall Wilson and many others; there's no editor's introduction, and no author notes – no explanation; but it appears to be a follow-up to an earlier anthology from the same editor, *Dark Side: Horror for the Next Millennium*, which we don't recall seeing.) May 2002.

Pratchett, Terry. **Thief of Time.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14840-7, 430pp, A-format paperback, cover by Josh Kirby, £6.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the 26th "Discworld" novel, by the author who, according to Booker Prize-winner A. S. Byatt, is "more important than J. K. Rowling or Philip Pullman," and who, according to a reviewer in the *Sunday Telegraph* ought himself to be "a strong contender for the Booker Prize"; reviewed by Iain Emsley in *Interzone* 170.) 2nd May 2002.

Pratchett, Terry, Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen. **The Science of Discworld.** Revised edition. Ebury Press, ISBN 0-091-88657-0, 414pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Kidby, £6.99. (Popular science text, based on the "Discworld" series of fantasies by Pratchett; the first edition appeared in 1999; the book is embedded in a humorous fictional frame written by Pratchett, but the bulk of the chapters consist of fairly lightly-handled mathematical and scientific exposition, by the well-qualified team of scientists [and sf writers] Stewart and Cohen; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 148; this edition is "fully revised and updated with two new chapters.") 2nd May 2002.

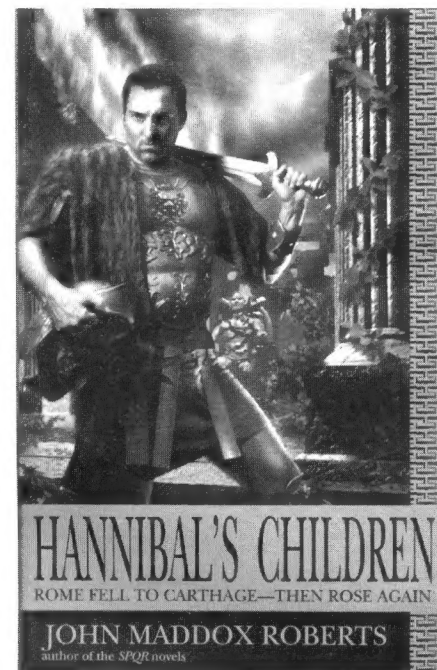
Pratchett, Terry, Ian Stewart and Jack Cohen. **The Science of Discworld II: The Globe.** Ebury Press, ISBN 0-091-88273-7, 368pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Kidby, £16.99. (Popular science text, based on the "Discworld" series of fantasies by Pratchett; first edition; like its predecessor [see above], the book is built around in a humorous-fantasy frame by Pratchett, but most of the chapters consist of pop-scientific exposition by Stewart and Cohen; this volume concentrates mainly on "the evolution and development of the human mind, culture, language, art, and science.") 2nd May 2002.

Radford, Irene. **Guardian of the Vision: Merlin's Descendants, Volume Three.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0071-6, xx+538pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gordon Crabb, \$6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; follow-up to *Guardian of the Balance* and *Guardian of the Trust* in this British-set series of seemingly well-researched "Elizabethan" Arthurian fantasies by an American writer; the text is preceded by 20 pages of genealogy, map, "Author's Notes and Acknowledgments" and "Cast of Characters"; from the copyright statement, it appears that the author's full name is Phyllis Irene Radford Karr – but she's apparently not the same person as the longer-established fantasy novelist Phyllis A. Karr.) May 2002.

Roberts, John Maddox. **Hannibal's Children.** Ace, ISBN 0-441-00933-6, viii+359pp, hardcover, cover by Scott Grimando, \$22.95. (Alternate-world sf novel, first edition; the first of a proposed series, it's set in a timeline in which Hannibal of Carthage succeeded in defeating Rome in 215 BC – a century after their defeat, the exiled Romans fight back.) 7th May 2002.

Rucker, Rudy. **Spaceland.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30366-3, 301pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; madcap mathematician Rucker's first novel for Tor, it's described as "a rousing hard-SF homage to *Flatland*, Edwin Abbot's classic math fiction.") June 2002.

Russell, Miles, ed. **Digging Holes in Popular Culture: Archaeology and Science Fiction.** Preface by Douglas Adams. "Bournemouth University School of Conservation Sciences Occasional Paper 7." Oxbow Books [Park End Place, Oxford OX1 1HN], ISBN 1-84217-063-5, xv+174pp, trade paperback, £18. (Illustrated collection of academic papers on aspects of archaeology and sf; first edition; the contributors' names are all unfamiliar to



us – Brian Boyd, Martin Brown, John Gale, Steven Membury, Julia Murphy, Vicky Walsh and others – but they cover some interesting topics: "Part One examines popular archaeological stereotypes from Howard Carter to Indiana Jones and Lara Croft; Part Two focuses upon the written word in the formulation of the past and of alternative worlds; Part Three examines the future and the shape of things to come"; the editor seems to have been a pal of the late Douglas Adams, and prevailed upon him to write this book's preface shortly before his untimely death in 2001.) Late entry: 18th January publication, received in April 2002.

Sawyer, Robert J. **Hominids.** "Volume One of *The Neanderthal Parallax*." Tor, ISBN 0-312-87692-0, 444pp, hardcover, cover by Donato, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; although blurbed as "a complete and satisfying novel in itself," this is the first of a trilogy concerning the encounter between modern humans and a Neanderthal civilization in a parallel timestream.) 8th May 2002.

Scott, Martin. **Thraxas and the Dance of Death.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-121-7, 252pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Thomas, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; "Martin Scott" is a pseudonym of British writer Martin Millar [who has also written various novels under his real name]; this is the sixth in a series of "pulp fantasy noir" paperback originals, the first three of which – *Thraxas*, *Thraxas and the Warrior Monks* and *Thraxas at the Races* – all came out close together in 1999, with the fourth, *Thraxas and the Elvish Isles*, and the fifth, *Thraxas and the Sorcerers*, following in 2000 and 2001; the first book became the unexpected winner of the [American] World Fantasy Award for best novel of 1999, a left-field decision by the judges which perplexed many observers.) 2nd May 2002.

Shinn, Sharon. **Jenna Starborn.** "A brilliant new twist on the classic story of Jane Eyre..." Ace, ISBN 0-441-00900-X, 381pp, trade paperback, cover by Jean Pierre Targe, \$14.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; Shinn is now a "national bestselling author" [i.e. in the USA]; like her earlier titles, this book appears to be packaged primarily as romance ["romance" in the modern, post-1920s sense of love stories aimed mainly at women readers] – although it has a far-future, interplanetary setting.) April 2002.

Shusterman, Neal. **Shattered Sky.** "Book Three in the Star Shards Chronicles." Tor, ISBN 0-312-85508-7, 414pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf/horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; conclusion to the rather drawn-out trilogy begun with *Scorpion Shards* [1995] and *Thief of Souls* [1999], in which "a

terrifying power infects an alien planet like a spreading virus"; in his a prefatory note the author states that "it is intended for an adult readership..."

Themes and subject matter may be too intense for younger readers.") *June 2002.*

Stableford, Brian. **Swan Songs: The Complete Hooded Swan Collection.** Big Engine [PO Box 185, Abingdon, Oxon. OX14 1GR], ISBN 1-903468-04-3, x+647pp, trade paperback, cover by Deirdre Counihan, £16.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition; it contains the six slim novels of Stableford's "Hooded Swan" series of cynical space operas [also known as the "Star-Pilot Grainger" series], originally published in the USA by DAW Books: *Halcyon Drift* [1972], *Rhapsody in Black* [1973], *Promised Land* [1974], *The Paradise Game* [1974], *The Fenris Device* [1974] and *Swan Song* [1975]; there is also a new four-page introduction by the author; recommended to those who didn't encounter these tales first time around; this is the sixth book from the print-on-demand publishing house run by Ben Jeapes; for ordering information, see the website: [www.bigengine.co.uk](http://www.bigengine.co.uk).) *April 2002.*

Turtledove, Harry. **Through the Darkness.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-03398-0, 514pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; follow-up to *Into the Darkness* [1999] and *Darkness Descending* [2000].) *4th April 2002.*

Vallejo, Boris. **Dreams: The Art of Boris Vallejo.** Text by Nigel Suckling. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-964-5, 128pp, very large-format paperback, cover by Vallejo, £14.99. (Sf/fantasy art portfolio; first published in the UK, 1999; a reissue in paperback of this plushly-printed, full-colour gathering of book covers and other artwork by the popular Peruvian-born American artist who famously specializes in spectacularly muscular men and buxom women.) *25th April 2002.*

Vaz, Mark Cotta. **The Art of Star Wars, Episode II: Attack of the Clones.** Ebury Press, ISBN 0-091-88469-1, 224pp, very large-format paperback, cover by Ryan Church, £17.99. (Copiously illustrated study of the background art, designs, roughs, etc., of the most recent *Star Wars* movie produced and directed by George Lucas; first published in the USA, 2002; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; this big volume also contains, towards the rear in its lavish double-columned pages [pp186-220], what appears to be the complete screenplay by George Lucas and Jonathan Hales; co-screenwriter Hales turns out to be British, and "lives with his wife, Sarah, in Devon, England" — a homely touch.) *23rd April 2002.*

Watson, Ian. **The Great Escape.** Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-09-6, x+283pp, hardcover, cover by Ron Walotsky, \$23.95. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; it contains an author's introduction plus 19 stories, all lively with ideas, all reprinted from various magazines and anthologies — including no less than seven from *Interzone*, "Three-Legged Dog," "Nanunculus," "Ahead!", "Such Dedication," "What Actually Happened in Docklands," "Tulips from Amsterdam" and "The Descent"; recommended.) *May 2002.*

Wells, H. G. **The Undying Fire.** House of Stratus [Thirsk Industrial Park, York Rd., Thirsk, N. Yorks. YO7 3BX], ISBN 0-7551-0424-2, 152pp, hardcover, £7.99. (Fantasy novella, first published in the UK, 1919; proof copy received; one of Wells's least-known books, this is a fantasy-of-ideas concerning God and Satan and a modern retelling of the biblical *Book of Job*; a curious, and rarely-available, item for Wells completists, it's one of 40 [yes, forty] Wells titles reissued in handy small-hardcover format by House of Stratus in the month of May; for ordering information, see their website: [www.houseofstratus.com](http://www.houseofstratus.com); Stratus have kindly sent us a selection, in paperback proof form, of six of the other books, including *Ann Veronica* [£9.99], *The History of Mr Polly* [£9.99], *Men Like Gods* [£9.99], *The War in the Air* [£9.99], *The Wheels of Chance* [£7.99] and *When the Sleeper Wakes* [£9.99] — all recommended!) *May 2002.*

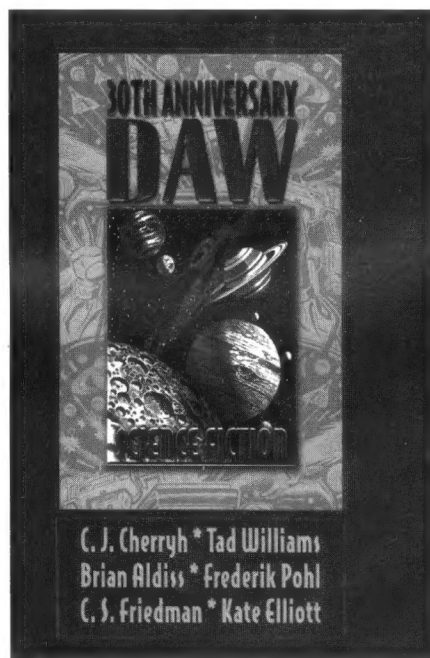
Wollheim, Elizabeth A., and Sheila A. Gilbert, eds. **DAW 30th Anniversary: Fantasy.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0070-8, xix+421pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy

anthology, first edition; published to celebrate the anniversary of the founding in 1972, by the late Donald A. Wollheim, of the family firm of DAW Books Inc., this consists of all-original stories by Lynn Abbey, Tanya Huff, Mercedes Lackey, Tanith Lee, Andre Norton, Melanie Rawn, Mickey Zucker Reichert, Jennifer Roberson, Michael Shea, Christopher Stasheff, Michelle West and others; the editor hiding behind the over-formal byline "Elizabeth A. Wollheim" is, of course, Betsy Wollheim, Don Wollheim's daughter.) *May 2002.*

Wollheim, Elizabeth A., and Sheila A. Gilbert, eds. **DAW 30th Anniversary: Science Fiction.** DAW, ISBN 0-7564-0064-3, xvi+462pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; published to celebrate the anniversary of the founding in 1972, by the late Donald A. Wollheim, of the family firm of DAW Books Inc., this consists of all-original stories by Brian Aldiss, Neal Barrett Jr, C. J. Cherryh, Kate Elliott, Ron Goulart, Charles L. Harness, Lisanne Norman, Frederik Pohl, Robert Sheckley, Brian Stableford, Ian Watson, Tad Williams, Timothy Zahn and others; Stableford's "The Home Front" is the lead story, and it's worth noting that his introduction to his own recent book, *Swan Songs* [see above], also pays considerable tribute to Don Wollheim, whom he terms "British science fiction['s]... staunchest supporter.") *May 2002.*

Wooding, Chris. **The Haunting of Alai-abel Cray.** Scholastic/Point, ISBN 0-439-99452-7, 338pp, B-format paperback, cover by Edward Miller, £5.99. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; 24-year-old Chris Wooding's first sizeable book, a "gaslight romance" set in Victorian London; praised by most of the British press, and a Nestlé-Smarties Book Prize Silver Award-winner, 2001; the *Bookseller* described it as "securely in the best storytelling traditions of authors like Joan Aiken, Philip Pullman and Tamora Pierce," with "a dash of pure Hammer Horror"; reviewed by Matt Colborn in *Interzone* 168.) *17th May 2002.*

Yeovil, Jack. **Beasts in Velvet.** "A Warhammer Novel." Games Workshop/Black Library, ISBN 1-84154-235-0, 286pp, A-format paperback, cover by Martin Hanford, £5.99. (Fantasy role-playing game spinoff novel, first published in the UK, 1991 [not "1993" as it states inside]; sequel to *Drachefels* [1989] in the "Genevieve" trilogy; "Jack Yeovil" is a pseudonym of Kim Newman; witty stuff, recommended.) *May 2002.*



# The Arthur C. Clarke Award 2002

Our back cover this month features a collage of pictures from the Arthur C. Clarke Award ceremony on 18th May. Gwyneth Jones (1) received the award, which is for best science fiction novel published in 2001, for her novel *Bold as Love*. The Ceremony took place in the Imax cinema at The Science Musum on the evening of 18 May 2002. Five of the six finalists were there – Gwyneth Jones (2) “I didn’t expect this – I have no words... thank you,” Justina Robson (3), Peter F. Hamilton (4), Jon Courtenay Grimwood (5) and Paul McAuley (6) (Connie Willis could not be present due to a prior commitment).

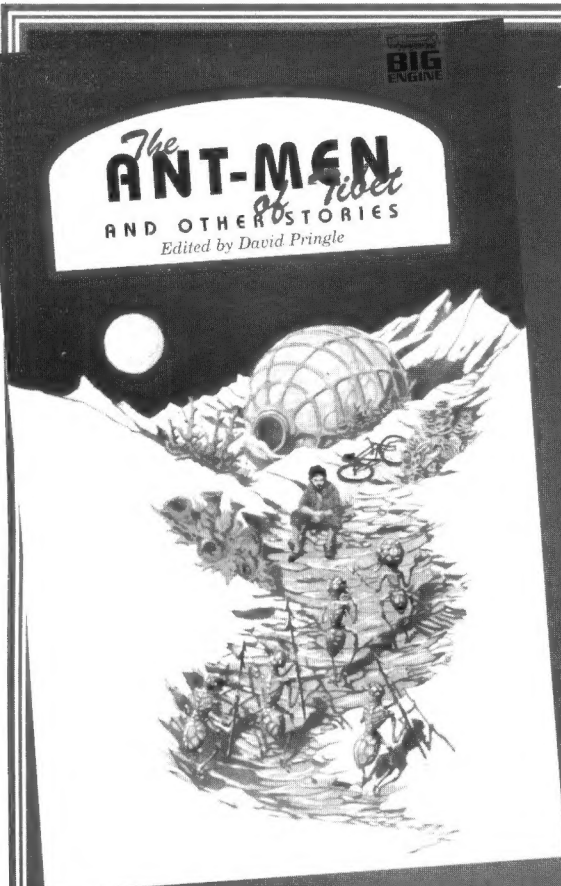
Paul Kincaid (7), the awards administrator, was the master of ceremonies. As has become usual, Angie Edwards (12), Arthur C. Clarke’s niece, read a message from her uncle. Last year’s winner, China Miéville (8), announced this year’s winner.

To mark Fred Clarke’s behind-the-scenes support over many years, Andy Sawyer and Maureen Kincaid Speller (10) presented him with a special surprise gift (15), an original painting by Danny Flynn (“careful, the paint’s still wet”), and a framed certificate.

In the afternoon before the ceremony, Pat Cadigan once again organised panel discussions and readings featuring the short-listed authors including Paul McAuley, Jon Courtenay Grimwood and Gwyneth Jones (11). Other notables present from the British science fiction scene were Cherith Baldry (13), Farah Mendlesohn (14) and John Clute (16).

Finally, the winner posed for photographs with the judges (17) – left to right: Tony Cullen, Paul Billinger, Gwyneth Jones, Paul Kincaid, Liz Sourbut and Lisa Tuttle.

Note: all pictures are copyright © 2002 Paul Brazier except for the picture of Justina Robson, which features on the Clarke Awards website at [www.appomattox.demon.co.uk/acca/2002.htm](http://www.appomattox.demon.co.uk/acca/2002.htm). These and many more pictures can be viewed on-line at [www.planet-brazier.com](http://www.planet-brazier.com)



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Stephen Baxter ♦ Alastair Reynolds

Chris Beckett ♦ Keith Brooke

Eugene Byrne ♦ Nicola Caines

Jayme Lynn Blaschke ♦ Molly Brown

Peter T. Garratt ♦ Eric Brown

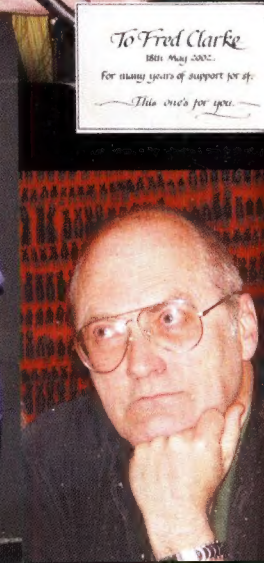
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*To Fred Clarke*  
1911 - May 2002  
For many years of support for af  
This one's for you